



BROKKEN ROAD

ROMANCE

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begs the reader to keep  
turning every page."  
*Bestselling author Kari Trumbo*

# BROKKEN YESTERDAYS

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

# LYNDA COX

# **Brokken Yesterdays**

## **Brokken Road Romances**

Book Eight

Lynda Cox

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Any discrepancies in the timeline between *Brokken Yesterdays* and the other novels in *The Brokken Road* series are entirely my doing. Working with several other authors and attempting to keep an unbroken timeline for when characters arrived in our fictional little town in Texas proved to be a challenge. In a few places, that timeline needed to be twisted a bit.

There are also minor characters in this series who appear in several of the stories. As with the timeline, there may be discrepancies in how those minor characters are portrayed from book to book.

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Dedicated to Nora. You have a unique and special voice. Keep writing.  
Never let anyone silence your voice.  
Also to Kaiulani for all of your help. Thank you!  
And, to another of my beloved collies, Georgia, AKC Champion  
Wych's Spirit of Defiance. *Deo Vindice!*



# Chapter One

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Brokken, Texas

April 1868

Victoria English, sheriff of the town of Brokken, glanced from side to side as she made her last rounds of the night through the slumbering town. She preferred to walk in the middle of the street as too often the dull, hollow thud of her boots on the boardwalk intruded into the peaceful silence. The weight of the revolver she wore on her hip felt as comfortable and as much a part of her as her own skin. Her gaze skipped along the repainted façades, reconstructed buildings, and the fully-stocked store front windows.

Just a year ago, Brokken was in its death-throes. She let a half-smile twitch the corner of her mouth as she looked from business to business. Brokken had survived the loss of more than half their men, a tornado that had miraculously missed the town, an attack from an outlaw gang who believed the Brokken brothers had hidden stolen Confederate gold in town. As if the Confederacy ever had vast amounts of gold...

The Knight home drew her attention. Low-pitched light spilled out the windows she knew to be in the front parlor. Dr. Knight was out, and Abigail wouldn't leave the parlor or extinguish the light until Mathew returned home.

She wondered which of the expectant mothers he attended to that night. Twenty-three men in total had answered their desperate plea to save Brokken and became mail-order grooms. Twenty marriages, fourteen expectant mothers, and three newborns revitalized their town. Her smile grew.

Victoria hesitated to step onto the porch. If Abigail wasn't awake, knocking on the door would not only wake her, but also ran the real risk of waking five-year-old Ethan. She'd ask Abigail in the morning who was the new citizen of the town.

A large shadow separated itself from those near the blacksmith shop. Victoria peered through the darkness, recognizing the doctor's buggy. The vehicle moved slowly, as if to avoid any of the rutting in the road. Curiosity piqued, Victoria waited. Unless there was a real problem, Mathew didn't bring patients back to the house.

The conveyance halted at the hitching rail. Victoria moved closer.



The slumped figure in the seat next to Knight didn't appear alive. As the doctor scrambled from the buggy, the front door of the house opened, spilling light across the porch and onto the motionless form.

The breath froze in her lungs. It couldn't be. It just couldn't. Her head spun. Large spots danced in her vision. Her lungs refused to take another breath. As if they had suddenly taken root, her feet froze to the ground, though her knees buckled.

"Victoria, help me get this man into the house."

Knight's order broke her immobility. Faster than she had ever drawn before, Victoria pulled the revolver, cocking it even as she drew it up. "Get back in the buggy, Doc, and take him to the jail."

"This man needs immediate medical treatment." Knight didn't even slow down in his haste to reach the unmoving passenger crumpled in the seat.

"Victoria!" Abigail's voice carried from the porch. "What are you doing?"

Victoria spared a second to throw a glance over her shoulder at her friend. Silhouetted in the lamp light, Abigail's extended stomach further increased Victoria's resolve. "I mean it, Doc. You aren't taking him anywhere except for the jail."

Metal chattered against metal when Knight lifted the motionless figure and hoisted him over his shoulder with as much effort as if the figure weighed less than a sack of horse feed. When the doctor turned, a length of chain dangled down his back from the man's wrists. Knight advanced a step, hesitating when Victoria added, "I'll shoot."

"Then shoot." Knight halted, and his gaze dropped to the gun in her hand. "Or get out of my way."

To her mortification, the muzzle wavered. She spread her feet to steady her stance, firmed her grip, and tightened her finger on the trigger. Abigail stepped between her revolver and the doctor.

"Vic, it's not him."

Abigail's voice, softened with pleading, reached past Victoria's pain and fear. Victoria allowed her to push the revolver down, her resolve cracking. The doctor advanced another step and the man over his shoulder groaned softly.

Victoria snapped the revolver up again, pushing Abigail to a side at the same time. Any cracks in her determination vanished, replaced with an implacable doggedness. "Put him back in the buggy and take him to the jail. If you don't, I will arrest you and I will shoot him."

She watched Knight's sight slip from her revolver to Abigail and back again. Without taking her gaze from the almost skeletal form draped over Knight's shoulder, Victoria repeated, "Take him to the jail. You can treat him there."

"Mathew, do as she says, please."

Knight nodded at his wife's words, and then returned his charge to the buggy. Abigail's gasp hissed in the night when the light spilling out of the house fell across the man's features. That gasp reinforced Victoria's belief of who she believed the doctor's patient to be. Even with his cheeks hollowed, his skin discolored with bruising, dirt and heaven only knew what else, and half his features obscured by thick, matted facial hair, the ice-cold dread in her heart told her all she needed to know.

"I don't know who you think this man is—"

Victoria nudged her head over her shoulder at Abigail, cutting the doctor off. "She knows who he is."

"—he's not in any condition to be a danger to anyone." Knight climbed into the buggy. "I'll wait for you at the jail."

Victoria grabbed a metal rail supporting the leather hood and stepped onto the running board next to the doctor. Ignoring Abigail's startled protest of her name, Victoria gestured with her revolver toward the small, squat building housing the jail. "Now you don't have to wait for me."

She should have dropped to the ground in a motionless heap from the glare Knight shot at her. He lifted the reins and lightly shook them over the horse's back. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he said to his wife.



VICTORIA LIFTED HER cup of coffee with both hands, the brew long gone cold, and looked out a jail window at the gray dawn. She gripped the metal as if she held on for dear life. Every fiber of her being quivered while nausea borne of an old terror left her light-headed. The cup between her hands bent, and the cold coffee dripped to the floor through a break in the weld.

Five years. For five years, no one had heard anything of him or from him. *Five years.*

"I'm going to bring Peter over here to strike those chains."

She startled with Knight's comment. "No. I'll use those to manacle him to the bars."

"Victoria."

Knight's voice dropped, whether from anger or shock, she wasn't sure. She didn't care what lowered his voice. The ever-lightening, drizzling gray dawn drew her attention and she startled again when the doctor took the leaking cup. He set the ruined mug on the window sill. He caught her shoulders and turned her to the cell. "Look at him, Victoria."

The door was open. Panic drove any thought from her head other

than to slam and lock that cell door. She reached for the door, an incomprehensible snarl ripping from her throat when Knight restrained her.

“I don’t know who you think he is—”

“He’s a killer.” She snapped her head around to glare at the doctor. “He killed m—he killed a baby.”

Knight’s firm grip on her shoulders didn’t alter, though some of the color drained from his face. “Then he needs to stand trial, but right now, he’s my patient. I am bound by my oath to do no harm. That means I have to get those chains off him and I can’t let you manacle him to the door.”

She stared at the motionless figure. Had he stopped breathing?

She wrenched free of Knight’s loose hold on her shoulders, angry with herself for the confusing sense of relief when her prisoner’s chest lifted fractionally. “I’ll go get Peter.” She shook her head to clarify her thoughts. “You stay with him. If he isn’t here when I get back, I’m holding you responsible.”

The doctor dipped his head in a terse acknowledgment. “He isn’t going anywhere in his condition.”

Victoria jammed her hat onto her head, clamping her mouth closed at the same time. She heaved the door open and marched out of the jail. In the middle of the road she paused, allowing some of the rigidity in her frame to ease, and looked over her shoulder. Moisture glistened on Knight’s buggy in the lightening gray, and the first sleepy twitter of a sparrow whispered across the square between the jail and the blacksmith’s shop. Lantern light from the two barred windows shimmered through the thick, swirling fog. She fully expecting to see that man silhouetted in the doorway.

A shiver rippled across her. With a deep breath and a squaring of her shoulders, Victoria looked away from the small jail and resumed her march to the blacksmith shop. She spent too much time learning how to be strong, how to be tough as nails, and she was the sheriff. No one was taking her badge from her; not without a fight. Not even her long-lost husband.



# Chapter Two

---



Muffled voices penetrated the blackness, buoying him out of the depths and into a place where hell was very real.

“Is he alive?” A woman’s voice, unconcerned and full of ice, asked.

No. He had to be dead. No one could survive this kind of full-bodied agony, searing in every fiber of his being. The fires raging in every joint and muscle, clean into the bone, could only be from Lucifer. He didn’t even have the strength to open his eyes.

“Yes.” A man’s voice. Another voice he didn’t recognize.

A firm hand lifted his head and pressed something made of warm metal to his lips. A cup. He tried to turn his head from this new torment but somehow the contents poured into his mouth. A convulsive swallow and he choked, coughing, unable to strangle the cry as the liquid burned his raw throat.

“Small sips. It’s got a bitter after-taste.”

He braced himself for more of the same torture. This time, the warm fluid didn’t burn as much, and he swallowed it down. He still couldn’t force his eyes open. He could barely move. Why didn’t they just kill him?

“Relax, Jonathan. You’ve been through a lot. It’s going to take some time for everything to heal.” The male’s voice again, even as his head was lowered into what could have been a pillow.

He had enough of his wits about him to know he wasn’t tethered to the wall by the metal collar they’d put around his neck or manacled and chained to a twenty-pound metal ball. He wasn’t defensively curled up in a corner, either. He couldn’t dredge up enough strength to tell him most people called him “Jon”. The struggle to form even a single word left him shaking. “Where...?”

“You’re home. You’re in Brokken.”

He tried to shake his head and didn’t have the energy. The name was familiar, though he couldn’t remember why. After escaping Colbert’s jail, everything became hazy, disoriented, fragmented...vignettes of running under the cover of darkness, stumbling through shallow creek after shallow creek, pain a constant companion. “Who...who are you?”

The hand gripping his shoulder didn’t inflict any pain. If anything, there was an attempt at comfort and encouragement in the gesture.

Confusion left him reeling.

"I'm a doctor. Name's Mathew Knight. Just rest now. You're going to be all right."

Whatever the doctor forced him to drink pulled him back into oblivion. He had no idea how much time had passed before he regained his senses again. The vague recollection of being urged more than once to swallow down some sort of thick broth flitted through him. He managed to pry his eyes open and without moving surveyed his immediate area. Deep shadows hid the nearest corner, while darker, more-defined vertical stripes marked what appeared to be a cement block wall. A cautious turn of his head revealed the door to the cell closed. A lamp hanging from a beam of the low ceiling and out of arm's reach created the deep shadows.

Keeping any movement to a minimum, he turned his attention to his own condition. The semi-sweet aroma of some salve rose from the bandaging wrapped around his throat, ankles, the wrist of his right arm, and from his left palm to just below his shoulder. The recalled sensation of the dog's teeth sinking deep into his hand and arm, coupled with the snarling of the cur as it hung onto him and thrashed from side to side, washed over him with chilling intensity. He barely repressed a shudder. If he hadn't thrown his arm up to protect himself, he would have had his throat ripped out.

The pristine white bandaging reassured him he hadn't been hallucinating. A doctor had been there and had tended to him. However, he was still chained. A single manacle encircled his left wrist and a length of sturdy, newer chain tethered him. Without moving, he trailed his gaze as far as he could along the length of the chain. If he had to hazard a guess, the other end was secured to the bars of the cell.

Even the filthy rags he'd been wearing were gone. Someone had clothed him in a long nightshirt and a soft, cotton sheet covered him from the waist down. For the first time in longer than he cared to recount, he felt clean. The aroma of the salve almost muted the harsh scent of strong lye soap. It stood to reason if his ragged, filthy clothing had been removed from him, someone also took the time to bathe his form. It would explain why the continual sensation of vermin crawling through his hair and on his skin wasn't present any longer.

Somewhere behind him, he heard a door creak, then footsteps on what sounded to be a stone floor. A feminine voice he didn't recognize asked, "Is he still asleep?"

"Yep." That voice he recognized from the other night. Why in the name of heaven was a woman sitting guard in a jail?

A different creaking slid through the small building. Did someone sit down or stand up? He settled on someone standing when a second

set of footsteps echoed across the stone floor.

“Victoria, you look terrible. When was the last time you slept in your own bed and got a full night’s sleep?”

Victoria...he should know that name. He didn’t know why, but he should know it. He wracked his brain, forcing the memories to return. Victoria...the woman who wrote the letter he carried with him ever since Tullahoma.

“I can’t leave a prisoner unguarded.” The voice he could recognize now as belonging to Victoria had a razor-sharp edge to it. “What are you doing here at this time of the night?”

“Ethan has an upset tummy—”

“He all right?”

The immediate anxiety in Victoria’s voice wrenched something deep in him. He shoved his confusing reaction away. Why did he care she was worried about some kid’s upset tummy? It wasn’t his concern. As soon as he could, he had to escape this jail and move on. The longer he was here, the greater the chances Colbert or one of his hired thugs would find him.

“—fine, but you know how Mathew is. He asked me to come and check on his patient.”

Mathew. The doctor. So, the doc’s kid wasn’t well. The second voice had to belong to the doctor’s wife.

A whisper of fabric announced the other woman’s approach. He noted neither a key turning the tumblers in a door or the sound of metal on metal as would be heard if the door was swung open.

“Fever’s not as high.” The back of her hand brushed across his forehead no heavier than the soft caress of a warm breeze. “Vic, have you really looked at this man?”

“That’s all I’ve done for the last week. Stared at him and tried to piece together what’s left of my—” Anger and something else, something he couldn’t quite put a name to, iced her voice. She stood right outside the cell, judging by the volume and pitch. “He escaped from somewhere, and I’m going to find out where. He’s going right back, too. If anyone thinks he can just show up after all this time, waltz right in here, and take up where he left off when he volunteered with Hood’s Texans...that isn’t happening.”

That wasn’t correct. He wasn’t a Confederate. He’d been with Rosecrans, in the Army of the Potomac. He’d led the second Kentucky cavalry, under the division command of General Jefferson Davis—his commanding officer’s name a perpetual source of amusement for the Union troops.

“And, if you think for one second, I’m going to go back to being his quiet, obedient, meek little wife, you’d better reevaluate that, too, Abigail Knight.”



VICTORIA FLUNG THE door to the jail open and stormed out into the night. She marched several feet from the still open door and then came to a halt. Her heart pounded with painful intensity, and the roaring in her ears deafened her to everything else.

The desire to run as far and as fast as she could from Brokken almost overwhelmed her. Run away from here. Run away from him. Run away from how weak and helpless he'd made her.

She plunged her fingers through her hair and closed her eyes, trying to regain some control.

"Vic." Abigail's arms closed around her in a gentle hug. "You can't send him back to wherever he was. It would be a death sentence."

"What else am I supposed to do? I have to follow the law. He's escaped from somewhere." Victoria pushed her away, staggering her friend. "You don't know what it's like, seeing him here, knowing he's back."

"I don't have any idea how difficult this has to be." Abigail shook her head slowly, her gaze resting on Victoria. "He's been gone for years, without so much as a single word from him. You're not the person you were when he left. He has to understand that."

A chill whispered across the sheriff. "So, you think it is Jonathan, too."

Abigail shook her head, again. "I don't know. He certainly looks like Jonathan—a lot thinner, much grayer, a lot more worn. But, I'm not sure."

"I'm sure." Victoria managed a step away from the jail, closer to the livery, closer to escape and freedom. A laugh, caustic in its bitterness, broke from her. "I told you he wasn't dead, that he'd be back."

"Does saying I told you so make you feel any better?" Abigail extended her hand. "So, he's back. And I—we, you and me—won't let him do the things he did before."

"If he isn't sent back or turned over to federal authorities as an escaped prisoner, he's still my husband. Let's say I ignore everything I promised I'd do as the sheriff and not turn him over. How in the name of heaven do we stop him from turning into a monster, again?" Victoria grabbed her friend's hand, grasping it hard enough to make Abigail wince, but she couldn't make herself temper the fierce hold.

"Simple." The smile breaking over Abigail's features combined anger, protectiveness, and a cool amusement. "We pass a law for this town that will put him in that jail for a long time if he ever raises his hand to you. I'll make it very clear to him that if he breaks any law in town, I'll be the one to send the telegram to the federal garrison in



Shreveport.”

Victoria knew every man on the town council and the mayor. Knew them well. Had done her job as sheriff to protect the town’s assets when Fritz returned after he had helped his brothers rob the bank. Yet, she looked the other way when extenuating circumstances revealed exactly why the Brokken brothers broke the law, and Klint and Chance had helped to not only return the funds but rescued the two older Brokkens. If nothing else, half the town council owed her a huge favor. She sucked in a calming breath. “You’ll talk to Mathew?”

Abigail’s smile widened. “I already have. He’s going to propose the new ordinance tomorrow night at the town council meeting.”

Victoria loosened her grip on Abigail’s fingers. An old shame scalded every fiber of her being and she lowered her sight to the ground. “Everyone will know what he did.”

“No, they won’t. Mathew’s going to point out the proposed ordinance is preventative in nature.” Abigail’s hand tightened for a brief second on hers. “You’re not the only one, unfortunately.”

That pulled Victoria up hard. There were other women in Brokken like her? Other women she should have protected with her badge and, if necessary, her gun? “Who?”

“Caroline Brooks was one.”

There had always been a reason for Caroline’s bruises and her broken bones. She had thought when word came Peter died in the Wilderness during the war and Caroline collapsed in the street, it had been out of grief. How had she missed this? Victoria berated herself. She missed it the same way everyone else missed it, the same way everyone missed what Jonathan had done—by looking the other way and not wanting to accept the ugly truth. “Who else?”

“Evie Collins, and Mathew and I suspect Mary Landry.”

“I guess it’s a good thing Father couldn’t convince me to marry someone else.” Victoria tilted her head toward the opened door of the jail. A rising flood of conflicting emotions washed over her. She had wanted him dead. Prayed he died. And yet, now that he was here, alive, albeit not exactly in prime health, she hoped perhaps as the War had changed so many of the men who fought it, Jonathan might also be a changed man. Anger for what she knew to be a baseless hope—he never changed, no matter how many times he said he would—choked that faint glimmer of hope. “Why couldn’t he be dead?”



# Chapter Three

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Victoria stood outside the closed door of the jail building, her hand on the doorknob, unable to make her feet move.

The meeting of the town council had been an unmitigated disaster. David Landry, when Mathew read the proposed ordinance, had started a shouting match with Fritz Brokken, Chance Hale, and himself. How dare the members of the council and the good doctor Mr. Mayor—she cringed with the recollection of the sneer in Landry’s voice—try to tell him or any God-fearing man how to be a proper husband? Landry had then launched into a diatribe of Fritz’s shortcomings; pointed out not only had Chance been a miserable blue-bellied Yankee, he’d been a Sharpshooter, a coward of the first degree; and Mathew was no more than a butcher with a fancy piece of paper.

Her father hadn’t said a single word, either for or against the proposed ordinance. When Landry turned to Paul Grisson, demanding his thoughts on this intrusion into a man’s privacy, her father had said he needed to pray about it. Disgusted, Victoria walked out of the town hall.

She stared at the doorknob she clutched, willing herself to open the jailhouse door. He was no different than any other prisoner held within the jail.

He was different, though.

The jail had never housed a man as gravely injured as he had been and had certainly never been used to keep her own husband under lock and key.

A snort broke from her. In his condition, he wasn’t a threat to a newborn kitten. She pushed the door open and staggered to a halt. Alexander Jennings slouched in the chair behind the battered, old desk, head flung back, mouth open, and snoring loudly. Jonathan sat with his back pressed against the block wall. He met her gaze, one eyebrow lifting ever so slightly.

Victoria gulped. She turned a glare to Alexander and slammed the door.

Alexander startled awake, leaping to his feet. Before he could say a word, Victoria blurted out, “I pay you to guard the prisoner, and when I come back, I find you asleep?”

“Come on, Sheriff. It’s just Jonathan.” Alexander didn’t even have

the decency to appear in the least embarrassed. “‘Sides which, it ain’t like he could escape. You got him trussed up like a Christmas goose.”

“He has a point.” Jonathan lifted both hands, the chain attached to the manacle around his left wrist chattering with the motion. A teasing grin lifted the corners of his mouth. “I’m rather constrained.”

How many times had she seen that grin when he tried to soothe over the hurt he’d caused when he claimed it was her fault he’d lost his temper? Victoria dropped her gaze to the desk top. A new, different anger washed over her. He was not going to make her feel that kind of shame, that choking helplessness, ever again. She snapped her head up and to Jonathan. “You, be quiet.”

She wasn’t sure because of his heavily, overgrown facial hair, but she thought one corner of his mouth twitched again. The new half-smile left her off balance. Jonathan never smiled when she made the mistake of verbally sparring with him. He snarled the few times she had been foolish enough to trade verbal jabs. Angry with her own confusion, she turned to Alexander. “When I hire you to guard a prisoner, that means you don’t fall asleep. I don’t care how secured that prisoner is. Jail breaks happen because someone was lax.”

“It’s just—”

“I said I don’t care who that prisoner is. I hired you to do a job, and you didn’t do it.” She grabbed Alexander’s upper arm and pulled him out from behind her desk. “Go home.”

“Ain’t you gonna pay me?”

“No. You didn’t do your job.” She pushed him toward the door.

“But—”

She added another push to Alexander’s back. “I said no.”

“That ain’t right,” Alexander muttered as he pulled the door open.

“Maybe the next time—if there is a next time—you won’t fall asleep on guard duty.”

Alexander slammed the door with so much force the glass in the window rattled. That it didn’t crack or outright break surprised her. The Brokken brothers had been good to their word to rebuild the jail better than it had been. Victoria stared at the closed door, debating her next course of action.

The chain clinked and chattered. She clenched her fists to keep from whirling around with her revolver drawn.

“How long are you going to keep me trussed up like a Christmas goose?” His voice lowered and filled with a warm and softly teasing quality.

Victoria stared out the window, willing her stomach to unknot, hating the sudden sweat dotting her palms. Light from the livery across the open area between the jail and the stable danced in the darkness. She unclenched her hands but refrained from dragging her

palms down the legs of the trousers she wore. Give him nothing that could be construed as fear or intimidation. It took almost all her fortitude to keep her voice level. "If I have my way, you'll stay chained in that cell until hell freezes over."

"What did I do to deserve that punishment?"

*There* was the dangerous, calm, even tone that she knew all too well. Her insides shuddered with the chill settling on her. She twisted her head over her shoulder, forcing herself to meet his gaze. "Are you going to tell me you don't remember?"

Something flickered across his expression she couldn't put a name to. That, more than anything, terrified her. He broke eye contact first, lowering his gaze to the floor at his feet. "Would you believe me if I said I'm not the man you knew?"

Her gaze settled on her desk, where in the upper right drawer she had put a letter and locket Mathew had removed from an improvised pocket in the rags Jonathan wore. A locket she instantly recognized as hers and a letter that bore her handwriting. She dragged her sight from the desk and back to the man studying the floor at his feet. "Skunks don't lose their stripes." Even she heard how viciously bitter her words were as they sailed across the distance.

Without lifting his head, he brought his gaze to her again. "That's harsh. What do I have to do to prove to you I'm no longer that man?"

"There is nothing you can do to prove that to me. Nothing." She reached for the doorknob, not even sure why she did it, other than to give her a sense of control and the security of being able to get out of the building and away from him.

Before her fingers could close around the knob, Mathew's tall form appeared in the window. The relief filling her still didn't allow her rigid form to relax. She pulled the door open, noting Mathew's gaze skipped across her and settled on Jonathan.

"That answered that question," he said, softly. His sight came back to her. "In spite of Landry's extremely loud and derogatory protest, and your father's inability to take a position, the town council put the new proposition to a vote tonight."

"It was voted down, wasn't it?" Victoria held no illusions how the vote went. If her father didn't approve of it, it wouldn't pass.

"It's effective immediately. Thirty-three to one, with one abstaining."

She should feel elation. Or relief, or something, that maybe, this new law would be able to protect her friends and neighbors from being harmed by their own loved ones. None of those emotions appeared.

The doctor clamped a hand onto her shoulder. "Go home, Vic, and get some sleep. I'll stay here tonight."

"I can't. What about Abby?"

"If she needs me, she can send Ethan. I'm not even a minute away from the house." He tossed his hat onto the desk. "Go home, now, and get some sleep. Those are doctor's orders, Sheriff."

"But, what about—"

"Go." He gestured out the open door. "He isn't going anywhere, and in his condition I'm more than a match for him."

"I'll go. I want to talk to Abby, first."

Mathew drew his head back, then nodded. "As long as you promise to go home after that and—"

"And go to sleep. Yes, Mathew, I will do that."



JON WATCHED HER WALK out the door, more than surprised at how she took orders from the doctor. The relationship seemed more that of siblings or very close friends than a professional one. He became aware the doctor hadn't moved away from the open door and the doctor's scrutiny became intense. Rather than confront the man, Jonathan lowered his gaze to the manacle around his wrist. "I don't know why y'all are bothering to keep guard over me. She's made sure I can't leave."

A single click made its way to him. Jon recognized the sound of the door latching. Knight remained silent as he made his way to the chair recently vacated by Alexander. The man lowered himself to the seat, and then propped his feet on the desk and folded his arms over his chest.

Jon noted the withering of the doctor's left hand and jerked his chin at the man. "Makes it hard to do surgery, doesn't it?"

The doctor's only response was a slight dipping of his head. He wasn't sure if Knight agreed or simply acknowledged the obvious. Jon forced himself to his feet. His vision blurred, and the world tilted. He gripped a metal bar to maintain his balance until the light-headedness retreated. "Aren't you worried I might fall over?"

"Nope."

"You don't have much of a bedside manner, do you?" What was he expecting from anyone? He was an escaped convict. He heard Victoria make the comment she'd stared at him for the last week. *A week*. He'd been in and out of consciousness for a week.

"Nope."

Jon forced himself to walk to the opposite wall, his staggering steps near the bunk in case he did fall over. The length of chain stopped him a few paces from the back wall. He sank onto the thin mattress and dropped his gaze to the manacle all the while very aware

of Knight's continued scrutiny.

He'd put a lot of time and distance between him and any pursuit, three weeks to be exact, but the longer he was held, the less that advantage was. He wasn't going back there. Not alive, anyway. In a brief outburst of frustration, he jerked his manacled wrist, pulling the chain tight with a ringing chattering of the links.

The doctor didn't seem to have any reaction at all.

When Jon couldn't stand the man's intense study any longer, he snapped, "What are you staring at?"

"Just trying to figure something out."

"Why don't you tell me what's got you so puzzled, so I can help you *figure* it out." He couldn't keep the sarcasm from his words. He managed to suppress the desire to jerk on the chain again.

"How low do you have to stoop to hit a woman, your own wife?"

If he had injected sarcasm into his voice, it paled in the face of the scathing condemnation in the doctor's words. His mouth dropped open, unable to form a word.

"Does hitting someone weaker than you make you feel more like a man?"

Jon shot to his feet, and crossed the cell in one, long stride. He caught himself on the bars when the light-headedness returned with a vengeance, buckling his knees. "I would nev—I'm not the man she knew before."

"That's doubtful." Knight finally broke his immobility. He opened a drawer on the desk and pulled out an oft-folded piece of paper and a simple locket, carefully settling the tattered page onto the desktop. He held the locket up by the filthy ribbon and tapped it, setting it slowly spinning. "Twice in less than five minutes, I've gotten a rise out of you."

Jon sank into the bunk again, his gaze fixed on the locket. "Doc, getting a rise out of me where I was would have gotten me killed. Here, I figure, that's not so likely. It's just downright frustrating to be both locked in a cell and tethered. Someone took that collar. I hoped my days of being chained up like a hunting dog were over."

"You want to tell me why you almost said you never hit Victoria before you said you're not the man she knew?" The doctor lowered the still slowly rotating locket into the drawer. "Or you want to try telling me you don't remember hitting her?"

Jon stared at a seam between two of the flat stone slabs in the floor. For three years, he'd fought to survive Colbert's prison. Once again, he found himself in a cell, accused of crimes he didn't commit and seemingly already condemned. No matter how he answered the doctor's accusation, he risked putting his neck into a noose. Finally, he said, "I made mistakes. I won't make the same mistakes, again."





# Chapter Four

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Jon stared at a ceiling he couldn't see through the darkness. Knight slept in the other cell. The amused wondering crossed his mind if Victoria caught the doc sleeping if she would light into him as she'd lit into that poor kid. Somehow, he doubted it.

He cautiously sat up, keeping his shackled wrist completely still. The pillow in the cell did little to cushion his head, but it worked very well to muffle the clinking of the chain. He twisted his hand, pulling against the manacle. It wasn't sliding off. Even secured around the bandaging on his wrist, someone made sure it was tightened to the point he could not maneuver his hand free. An exploration of the lock didn't help, either. Without the key or a heavy hat pin to trip the mechanism, the manacle would remain tightly locked.

"The wrist manacles she used to tether that chain to the bars are just as secure," Knight said through the darkness.

Jon shook his head and collapsed backwards onto the bunk. He barely kept a growl of frustration curbed.

"I'm a doctor. I've gotten into the habit of sleeping very lightly when I have a patient needing round the clock attention." Amusement added another layer to the doctor's voice. "I've also got fairly good night vision."

"I don't think I need medical care at all hours of the night and day." He turned his attention to the ceiling. How much could he share that wouldn't put him in jeopardy of having his neck stretched? If he was still here when Colbert showed, he was as good as dead. He'd escaped prison, injured a guard and killed one of Colbert's vicious man-hunting dogs in the process. In Colbert's view, the loss of Precious was the greater crime. God help him if DeLindsey was with Colbert if they ever caught him.

He closed his eyes. He'd forced himself to sleep before in places far worse than this. This time, his thoughts refused to quiet. If he was going to be held here, the last thing he wanted was to be dragged out of the cell and handed over to the federal authorities for transport back to the Indian Territories clad in no more than a flimsy sleeping shirt. "Doc, do you think she'd be opposed to allowing me clothing other than this nightshirt? And maybe a wash basin, so I can clean up?"

“I’ll talk to her in the morning, but I don’t think she’ll let you have a razor.”

He rather doubted that, too. He stared up at the ceiling again. Should he thank the man for talking to the sheriff on his behalf? A more pressing thought crossed his mind. “Why didn’t you just let me die?”

The mattress in the other cell rustled. “Letting you die wasn’t part of the oath I took when I became a doctor.”

For some reason, Knight’s words brought to mind the small locket he carried with him ever since the night he’d woken up confused on the battlefield at Tullahoma, the same locket now secured in a drawer in the sheriff’s desk. The miniature captured the woman serving as Brokken’s sheriff but didn’t do her justice. He’d stroked the small snip of hair included in the locket so many times all the strands had broken and become lost in the intervening years. The locket and hair snip were carried in a single page letter she’d written. He’d unfolded it and read it so often the paper tore along the creases where it had originally been folded. Read it so often he’d memorized every word she wrote.

*Jonathan, all is well here and there has been very little fighting near us, something for which we can all be thankful. The news of how this war progresses does not come often, though we do receive the casualty reports fairly regularly. Every report, I search for your name. It was heart-breaking for Laura Meyers to read of Calvin, Mathias, and Obadiah’s deaths, all in the same battle. Little Calvin is too young to fully understand and much too young to be without his father.*

*You are in my prayers every night. When you return, your happiness will be my only goal. Father tells me I can insure your happiness by being a better wife. I suppose I shouldn’t burden you with an obligation to write, though I wish you would send a few words back. You must have so many other worries weighing upon you. I do not wish to add to those cares.*

*Please write.*

*Victoria*

He drew in a long, deep breath and slowly let it out. That letter hadn’t been written to him.



VICTORIA WALKED SLOWLY down the middle of the street toward the general store and post office. Wednesday always brought a thick packet of wanted posters from the US Marshal’s office in the Indian Territories. The outlaws seemed to prefer Indian Territory. Most law officers didn’t want to take the risk of tracking those dangerous men into equally dangerous territory.

Brokken stirred to life in the muted pastels of a late spring morning. Curt Brokken met her on the boardwalk outside of the general store. She stared at him, not sure if she was surprised or disappointed the oldest Brokken brother was home. Perhaps, his journey to the family holdings in Germany hadn't given him the answers he needed.

"When did you get back?"

"Late last night. I decided not to wait for the train and rented a horse." As he unlocked the store, he spoke over his shoulder. "Last night's packet is a lot thicker than usual."

Though nothing had truly changed since last night, after a deep sleep that had been remarkably restful in one of the patient rooms on the first floor of the doctor's house, Victoria could find reasons to smile. It didn't hurt, either, that Abby had her laughing until she cried. Victoria couldn't resist tormenting the oldest Brokken brother. "There posters in this one for you and your brothers again?"

Curt froze, a frown wrinkling his brow. Then, he seemed to realize she teased him. In a complete and total deadpan, even as he pushed the store's door open, he said, "We won't show up on any wanted posters until we're all off your terms of probation, Sheriff."

"I'll be the first to mount up to hunt you down and bring you back if you show up on any."

"Don't doubt that for one second." He walked into the store. "Be right back with your packet."

She glanced at a new dress in the front window. Gold thread detailed a jacket of deep purple velvet. The linen skirt appeared to have been dyed with a strong tea and gold thread embellished the hem. She was so lost in admiring the craftsmanship in the detailing on the jacket she didn't even hear Curt return.

"That would look good on you, Sheriff, with your hair color."

Victoria snapped her head around to the store-owner. "Curt Brokken, are you flirting with me?"

"Wouldn't do any good now," Curt said, shoving the official, leather-bound packet from the marshal's office toward her. Bright color crept up his face. "I'm just repeating what Deb said when I pulled that out of the shipping box. She helped me get everything organized that had arrived while I was in Germany. She said it about three times while she put it on that mannequin."

If she didn't know better, Victoria would almost hazard a guess Curt was sweet on her. Trying to avoid creating further awkwardness, she took the packet into both hands, and then stepped closer to the dress. The detailing was exquisite. This was ridiculous, to even look at it and dream of putting it on. She'd never be able to afford a dress of this quality. "When would I have the occasion to wear something like

this?"

"Why not wear it for your husband?" Curt stood at her side. "A man would have to be dead to not notice a pretty woman dressed in that."

Curt's words washed over her as chilling as a bucket of ice-cold water dumped over her head. Victoria turned away from the dress now bathed in the first light of day. The very last thing she wanted was to draw Jonathan English's attention. She clutched the packet to her chest and walked away from the store.

"Victoria!" Her mother marched along the boardwalk, in an unerring path toward her.

Victoria couldn't keep her groan of frustration silent. She drew in a fortifying breath, recognizing the determined set to her mother's expression.

"Did you spend another night at the jail?" her mother asked.

"No, Mother, I didn't." Victoria glanced down the street at the small, squat, flat-roofed building. There were times, the ugly little building felt more like her home than her own house did. At that moment, bathed in the early morning light, the small building didn't look quite so ugly, either.

"You weren't at home when your father and I went by there last night after the town meeting."

"That's because I was at Abby's. I went there for the night. Mathew stayed at the jail to guard the prisoner." Why did talking to her mother make her feel as if she was a child again, always having to explain herself, justify every action?

"I know." Her mother's voice and bearing softened. "I went to the jail this morning, a little after dawn. I woke early and went to see if you wanted to join me for my morning walk."

"I'm sorry, Mother. If I'd known—"

Trudie Grisson took her daughter's elbow. "Vickie, you don't need to apologize to me. But there is something I have to discuss with you."

"Can't it wait? I have to get over to the jail, so Mathew can go home."

"This is important." Her grip tightened on Victoria's elbow.

"All right. What is it?" Without being rude and resorting to outright disrespect, Victoria realized her mother wasn't going to stop until she'd said her piece, whatever that was.

"I know you're holding that man in the jail because you believe it's Jonathan, and you're afraid he's going to hurt you again."

Victoria's jaw dropped. Who told her mother about Jonathan's abuse? She had only told two people, and she knew with an utter certainty, Abigail would have never breathed even a word of it. That left her father. The man who told her she needed to be a better wife so

that Jonathan would stop finding fault with her. “Of course, it’s Jonathan. Who else could it be?”

Trudie shook her head. “He looks enough like him to be Jonathan’s twin, but I don’t think it’s Jonathan.”

Beyond worrying about being rude, Victoria snapped, “For heaven’s sake, Mother. What makes you think that?”

Her mother stroked her arm. “When I went to the jail this morning, he didn’t recognize me. Oh, he covered it quickly enough, but he didn’t know who I was. When your father told me all those years ago what Jonathan was doing, I couldn’t look at that man without such a rage in my heart for what he was doing to my baby. This morning, I didn’t feel that rage with that man in the jail.”

“If you knew what he was doing...” Victoria sucked in a sharp breath and trailed off for a heartbeat. “All you can see is a man who’s had some of the pain and hurt he dealt out finally visited on him. Isn’t Father so fond of quoting that if you sow the wind you will reap the whirlwind? Jonathan’s reaping the whirlwind.”

Trudie placed a hand over Victoria’s heart. “Jonathan left so many scars here that aren’t visible and damaged your heart’s ability to see. That man in the jail is not Jonathan.”

“Who else could he be? He looks like Jonathan, talks like Jonathan, sounds like Jonathan.” She shook her head, silencing anything else her mother might say. “I have to go.”

“Victoria, whoever that man is, you cannot continue to hold him in your jail. You either have to set him free or—” A visible shudder passed over her mother. “—you have to send him back to the place he escaped from. What you’re doing isn’t right.”

“I’ll do what’s right,” Victoria pulled away from Trudie. “I have to go, Mother.”

Leaden legs carried her away from her mother to the jail. She pushed the door open. The aroma of rich, freshly brewed coffee greeted her. Both her prisoner and temporary guard were awake, and both clutched a cup of the dark brew.

Mathew rose from the chair behind her desk. “Your mother was here.”

“I know.” The words sounded on a sigh. “I ran into her outside of the general store.”

A sympathetic smile crossed the doctor’s face even as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the small, pot-bellied stove in the corner of the room. “Coffee’s ready.”

“Thank you.” Victoria dropped the packet on the desk. The slap of the heavy pouch onto the wood sounded uncomfortably too close to what a slap against skin sounded like. Another chill skipped over her.

“I’m going home to check on Abby. Before I head out to the Fenton

place, do you want me to stop at Molly's and ask her to bring breakfast here for you and him?" Mathew paused in the open door.

Victoria nodded, even as she poured a cup of coffee.

Mathew still hesitated. "Vic, he's well enough to be up and about. I'm no lawyer, but I think you need to find out where he escaped from if you plan on keeping him chained and locked up in that cell. That's the legal thing to do. Morally, if you discover where he escaped from, sending him back there is a death sentence, and that's not right."

Abigail had said almost the same thing to her. As had her mother. While she knew she had to send him back to wherever he had escaped from, her heart shrank from that action. No matter the crime, no man deserved the cruel torture Jonathan had received.

"Unless I find out where he's escaped from, you're right. I can't hold him like this." She watched Jonathan's feigned air of utter disinterest from the corner of her eye. "Even though I'd like to retroactively charge him under the town's new ordinance, I can't do that."

"No, I don't think that's legal, either." Mathew clamped his hat onto his head. "There isn't anything that says you can't tell him to get out of town and stay out of town."

Victoria waited until Mathew pulled the door closed behind him and she heard his footsteps echo on the boardwalk before she canted her head to Jonathan. "As soon as Molly brings breakfast for you, I'll go to the house and get your belongings."

"Could you bring my shaving kit, too, please?"

"You took that with you when you left."

He blinked, as if he had realized something was wrong, and then that half-smile returned. "I forgot I took it with me. I guess I won't be shaving any time soon."

"You can get a shave in the next town over. I want you out of *my* town by noon."

Something shifted in the depths of his eyes, darkening the blue. "I'll be gone before noon."

"You come back, Jonathan English, and I'll shoot you on sight. I'll risk hanging to kill you."

The blue darkened further before he dropped his head to study the cup held between his hands. "I wouldn't want to be the one responsible for your neck being snapped in a hangman's noose, Vic."

She startled with the shortened version of her name. He had never called her that before. If he had ever used an endearment or a pet name for her, it was either "darlin'" or "Torie." Unwilling to puzzle through why he'd chosen that form of her name, she crossed over to her desk and turned her back to him.

The packet of new wanted posters drew her attention and she slid

the collection closer. A quick tug of the thin leather thong opened the large envelope, and she pulled the thick stack free. Each poster was studied in turn. So far, none of those being sought was anyone she recognized or had seen in Brokken.

She sipped her coffee, wondering why the marshal's office sent her posters for bank robberies in Missouri and Kentucky, the deeds committed by what were apparently two sets of brothers, a Frank and Jesse James and a Cole and Bob Younger. Another was for a Clint Reno up in Indiana for train robbery. That was the first time she'd seen anyone wanted for train robbery. Did the marshal's office in Indian Territory have the slightest idea how far they were from Indiana?

A knock on the door halted her study of the fugitives and outlaws. Molly stood outside the door. Victoria gestured for her to come in. The mouth-watering aroma of fresh-baked biscuits, gravy, eggs and bacon combined with the sweet scent of the beignets Molly's husband Thomas had become famous for in and around Brokken.

"I'll be back later to get this when you're done with it." Molly set the basket on the desk and pulled the napkin covering the contents off, even as she cut a quick, openly curious glance into the occupied cell behind Victoria. "I put plates and forks in here."

"We thank you kindly, ma'am."

*We?* Jonathan had never included her in any statement like that before. Even though she recognized the warmth in his voice that brought a blush to Molly's cheeks, by thanking her for both of them, it wasn't really flirting, was it? And calling Molly "ma'am"? He'd known Molly for as long as they had lived in Brokken.

Victoria huffed out a short breath. Molly shook herself as if she had been caught wool-gathering, smoothed her hands down her skirt, and took a step back. "Mathew suggested a light repast, as Mr. English hasn't had a lot to eat for some time. Anyway, I'll be back later to get the basket and such."

"I'll bring it to the café, Molly." Victoria lifted a plate from the depths. If this was what Molly considered a light repast, she wondered just how much Molly would have brought to the jail if Mathew had said Jonathan could have a full meal. "I have to go to my house and get his belongings. He's leaving."

Molly's mouth dropped open. For a slender moment, Victoria wondered how much gossip this development would cause and realized she didn't care. As if folks hadn't clucked and sent disapproving glances at her before. The crescendo was reached, not when she pinned the badge to her blouse, but when she donned a pair of trousers. Let them gossip.



JON MOVED THE SCRAMBLED eggs around on the plate with his fork. He never liked his eggs scrambled. Couldn't tolerate the texture. One piece of bacon, a bite of the gravy smothered biscuit, another bite of the airy, melting, sweet beignet and his stomach hurt as if he'd stuffed himself on a rich, Christmas supper.

He set the plate on the bunk, but gripped the fork, staring at the tines. Realizing he was planning to pick the lock on the manacle with the utensil, he shook his head. She said she was letting him go. She was in such an all-fired up hurry to have him leave, she didn't even stick around to eat the meal that woman...Molly, yeah, Molly, brought. Victoria's breakfast was on her desk, untouched.

The question was why was she letting him go. There wasn't any doubt he'd escaped from somewhere. It wouldn't take much to learn where he'd been. Until he was long gone from this town, he was willing to play the role of the man everyone seemed to think he was. His look-alike wasn't a convict and probably didn't have wanted posters all over creation. His gut twisted with assuming that identity, though. The thought of raising his hand to any woman made him physically ill. Striking someone as unique as Victoria was totally out of his realm of comprehension.

Even though she apparently preferred trousers over skirts, he would be hard pressed to say she wasn't feminine. If anything, those trousers revealed her curves more than a skirt would. She also had the respect of the town's folk, from what little he saw in her interaction between that kid last night and with Knight. A woman sheriff...A chill lifted the hair on the back of his neck. Was she letting him go just so she could kill the man she thought him to be in a claimed jail-break?

He dropped the fork next to the plate. A quick death from a bullet would be better than what awaited him if he ended up in Colbert's clutches again.





# Chapter Five

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Molly's café was busier than usual when Victoria stopped on the short walk to her house. She caught Mr. Reed's eye across the noisy room and gestured to the carrier. He nodded at the narrow parson's table under the window. Victoria set the basket next to a vase full of freshly picked wildflowers and left.

An ordeal. That's what the walk from the café to her house felt like. Or what she imagined a forced march would feel like. Victoria shook off the sensation. She didn't want him in her town. She most certainly didn't want him in her house, ever again, or anything else that went along with *that* man.

She walked into the house, the cool interior a marked change from the already warm morning. A small wooden crate in the back of the armoire held the clothing Jonathan left behind when he mounted up with the local Texas brigade six years ago. As she lifted the trousers, she shook them out, just in case any small critters had made a home in the fabric without her knowledge and then tossed them onto the bed. Her eyes had to be playing tricks on her. The trousers seemed too short legged to be Jonathan's.

She held a shirt up by the shoulders and lifted it at arm's length. If Jonathan regained all the weight he'd lost to become as horribly emaciated as he was, the shirt would still be much too large for him. All of Jonathan's height was in his torso, wasn't it? Why did she seem to think his legs had gotten longer in the intervening years? Could it be these garments weren't his?

A firm mental shake drove that thought away. Of course, they were his. Over time, between the humidity and just being stored, the material in the trousers had shrunk. That had to be why she assumed they were too small for him. She wadded the shirt between her hands and threw it onto the trousers draping her mattress. Two pair of socks, suspenders, and a full union suit followed. A pair of brogans, older and already thinning on the soles and so left behind, were the last of his belongings in the armoire.

She dragged the small wooden crate out and replaced the items with much less care than they had originally been stored away. With a grunt, she hefted the box onto her hip and made her way back to the jail.

Jon quickly pulled the sheet over the lower half of his body, covering what the night shirt didn't hide.

Victoria dropped the wooden box unceremoniously onto the floor next to the cell door. She pulled her revolver, cocked it, and pointed it at Jonathan. She tossed a single key to him, and it landed on his lap. "That's the key for the manacle around your wrist. Unlock it."

"Are you this cautious with every prisoner?" His gaze skipped from her face to the unwavering revolver and back to her face. He never even acknowledged the key. "Or is this treatment reserved just for me?"

"Unlock it." She gestured with the muzzle toward the key. Answering him only invited a discussion she didn't want and doubts she didn't need.

He picked up the key and shoved it into the locking mechanism. When the manacle fell away and clattered to the floor, Victoria used the muzzle to gesture, again. "Stand up and go to the corner. Put your back in the corner and don't move."

His shoulders slumped, and a soft, huffing breath broke from him. "I'm not going to hurt you, Victoria. I'm not that man...anymore."

"Get up." She gestured again. "Now."

Jonathan stood and what color he had in his face drained. He caught the bars to steady himself. Victoria jumped back a step, cursing herself for the response, locking her knees to hide how much they tried to knock. With an effort, he straightened and then made his way to the back corner of the small cell.

Without lowering the revolver, or taking her gaze from him, she backed to her desk. She glanced at the key ring just long enough to locate it and the cell key. Keeping the muzzle aimed at him, she pulled open a small drawer and took out the locket and letter that had been in the pocket of the rags he wore when Knight brought him to the jail. She then turned her sight to Jonathan. If it weren't for the walls, he might not be standing. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his color was still ashen.

Her conscience railed at her. She nudged the muzzle at the end of the bunk. "Sit down." She berated herself for the softening of her voice.

He offered a curt nod of acknowledgment and sank into the thin mattress and then leaned against the wall behind him, his eyes closing. In the sudden quiet in the jail, his ragged breathing rasped. The chattering of the ring when she shoved the key into the lock and twisted the tumblers sounded abnormally loud.

She hesitated to open the door.

"Put the gun down." He lifted his head off the wall, meeting her gaze. "Please. Trust me enough to believe me when I tell you I'm not

any threat to you, darlin’.”

The endearment shattered her wavering doubts and silenced the angry voice of her conscience.

“I don’t trust you. I’ll never trust you again.” Victoria dropped the locket and letter into the box, jerked the door open, and kicked the small wooden box into the cell. She slammed the door with a resounding clang, and viciously twisted the key, relocking the cell. Only then did she holster her gun. “Get dressed. You’ve got five minutes. I’ll wait outside.”

She stormed her way to the door, halting when, the words barely audible, he said, “I’m sorry.”

Her shoulders stiffened with her effort to not turn to him. She pulled the door open and stepped onto the boardwalk. She couldn’t get him out of her town soon enough. Part of her wanted to believe him, believe he wasn’t that man anymore, believe he had changed. Another part screamed he always said he was sorry and then twisted it around so it was her fault he’d lost his temper. He’d promised, again and again and again, if she just did this or that he wouldn’t raise his hand to her.

Deborah Hale drove by, waving in greeting. Mechanically, Victoria returned the gesture. In the distance, the mournful wail of an approaching train rolled to her. She closed her eyes, gathering up her composure. It took the train a good ten minutes to arrive in town from the point where its whistle was first heard. She’d give him until the train pulled into the station.



JUST WHERE IN THE NAME of heaven was he going to go? Jon glanced at the key still in the lock but didn’t move to open the door. He didn’t have a single red cent to his name. The simple exercise of putting clothes on left him shaking with exhaustion. If he tried to walk from town, he wasn’t going to get very far.

If Colbert was still searching for him—as if that man would give up—the search hadn’t led to Brokken. Yet. So far, his luck was holding. He was a little more than amazed Victoria was just going to cut him loose.

A train whistle pierced his wandering thoughts. Before the last note faded, Victoria pushed the door open and reentered the jail. She stopped and glanced at the stack of papers she had tossed onto the desk. Her hands dropped to the desk top, palms flat against its surface.

“I can’t leave if you don’t open the cell.”

Without looking at him, her head bowed to the desktop, she said, “Key’s still in the lock.”

He reached through the bars, took hold of the key, and hesitated. "Are you going to play this like a jail break and shoot me while trying to escape?"

Without looking up from the stack of papers, she shook her head as if she didn't believe his hesitation in walking out of the small jail. "I want you out of my town."

"Come and unlock the door, please." He stood and backed to the far corner. "I don't want to risk a shot in the back."

She flipped another page. Every line of her form stiffened, seemed to freeze. Then, she straightened and walked to the cell door, never once looking at him. Instead of unlocking the door and opening it, she removed the key. "You should have taken the chance when you had it, Jonathan. I would have let you walk out, and I wouldn't have bothered to come after you. You almost got away."

"My name isn't Jonathan."

Her eyes widened, and her eyebrows rose even as a smile, completely devoid of amusement, twisted her lips. She backed away from the door and leaned her bottom onto the desk. The key ring clattered onto the old wood, sounding like so many links in a chain being gathered up.

"It's Jon. Jon—"

"Aliases used include Jon England, Jon Michaels, Andrew Michaels, Jon Michael Andrews." She reached behind her, picked up a paper, and continued to read. "Jonathan English is wanted for prison escape, killing a guard, and wounding another."

Those were wanted posters all over her desk. His escape had finally been reported. It was something he knew Colbert would have been loath to do, because it meant he had to admit he'd lost a prisoner and been unable to follow the trail. Jon sagged against the wall. If he wanted even a chance at surviving beyond the end of the week, he had to talk fast. "I never used those aliases. The man who stole my name, my identity, he uses them. My name is Ishmael Jonathan Michael Andrews, though I go by 'Jon', and I was born on Christmas Day, 1839, in Fairfax, Virginia."

Her unamused smile grew and iced over. "The man who stole your name. Of course. You couldn't possibly be responsible for any wrong doing. Just when did this happen?"

"At Tullahoma."

Victoria recoiled as if she had been struck. Something about that place resonated with her. Jon continued, not taking the time to puzzle through why Tullahoma meant anything to her, "I was leading a charge against a group of Hood's mounted infantry. I rode up on a man, and it was like looking in a mirror. We were both startled but before either of us could react, a cannon ball hit the ground between

us. I was thrown from my horse and when I came to, it was night. My shell jacket was gone and my bedroll and everything in it had been taken.”

Jon fell silent, recalling the absolute confusion, the nauseating pounding in his head when he regained consciousness that rainy night in Tennessee, how the stench of death mingled with the sharp scent of gunpowder and rolled across the landscape in waves pushed by the rainy breeze. Victoria’s icy smile faded.

“Go on,” she urged him.

“Do you believe me?”

“Not one word, but I’m enjoying the story.”

“What’s the point of continuing if you don’t believe me?” He sank onto the bunk. “You’ll want to send a telegram to Alva Colbert at Watonga Prison in the Indian Territories. That’s where I escaped from.”

Victoria placed the poster on the desk and leaned forward. “When did you say you were born?”

“Christmas Day, 1839.” He tried not to hope that maybe she was believing even a small iota of what he said. Her expression betrayed nothing, not even disbelief.

“Explain this: How did you come to have my locket and a letter I wrote if you aren’t Jonathan English?” She caught the edge of the desk under her palms and gripped the wood so fiercely her knuckles gleamed white.

Jon dropped his head. “When I woke up, everything that was mine was gone. The real Jonathan English left his shell jacket behind. In the inside breast pocket was that letter, the locket, and a small snip of hair.”

Her eyes widened ever so slightly with the mention of the small lock of hair that had been with the other two items. “So, why didn’t you go back to the Union side?”

He threw a quick glance at her. She had eased her grip on the edge of the desk, and her brow was furrowed. Tossing all his cards onto the table seemed his best recourse. “I lost my memory for a few hours. I didn’t know who I was, where I was. I assumed the jacket was mine, but it didn’t fit exactly right. And it didn’t feel right. I knew I wasn’t a captain in the Confederacy. I knew it all the way to my bones, but when I put the jacket on, I found the locket and the letter.”

He debated telling her how disgusted he was that he had to wear that loathed color, or how his opinion of the man who’d dropped his shell jacket and left behind such heartfelt mementos—he assumed running from the field of honor—had been as low as he’d ever thought of any man.

“If you’d been caught wearing that shell jacket—”

“I would have been summarily executed as a spy, once it was realized I wasn’t English.” Jon lifted his head, staring across the cell at the far wall. “I crawled under a bush, deciding to stay where I was until daylight. I hoped with a little bit of sleep, my memory would return. I woke up again shortly before dawn and tried to make my way back to Union lines. I kept the jacket with me, as long as I was in Confederate held territory.”

“Why?” The question snapped between them.

“English and I looked enough alike, if I was discovered behind Confederate lines, I hoped I could bluff my way past any pickets or troops.” Jon pulled a hand through his hair, tugging the overly long strands from his brow. “I didn’t know how alike we appeared until I almost walked right into a small Rebel camp. Several of the enlisted men called me by his name. Before I could back-track, I overheard a few of the soldiers talking about what had happened overnight in the Union encampment. One of the men said some sort of demon had been set on the Yankees. They found five men and two officers dead in their tents, their throats slit and their...” He sucked in a deep breath, forcing himself to continue. “Their hearts were cut out.”

He looked down, startled to see how fiercely his hands trembled. “I made my way to the Union lines, buried the jacket in some brush. Before I could walk into the camp, I heard one of the commanding officers ordering a full out search for me. The orders were to bring me back alive, so he could personally shoot me between the eyes. If I resisted, they had orders to bring my body back.”

“It was Jonathan.” The fear lowering her voice to little more than a whisper echoed the horror he still felt all the way into the marrow of his bones.

“I’ve always assumed so. I later heard that I had been seen leaving the last tent, covered in blood, and grinning from ear to ear.” Jon unsuccessfully repressed a deep shudder. “I panicked. I knew I’d never live long enough to even protest it hadn’t been me. There were seven good men who had been butchered in their sleep. I got the jacket again and made my way west. I went to Indian Territory, hoping I could just disappear there.”

Victoria shifted her weight from foot to foot. “What happened?”

“I was working on a small cattle ranch after the war ended and a drifter came through. He recognized me because he’d been a private in one of the companies attached to Rosecrans’s command. I didn’t know it at the time. That night, eight men burst into the bunk house, beat me half to death, and then dragged me to a territorial judge. They couldn’t try me for the murders in Tullahoma because the only man who had seen me leaving the tent had been killed in the Wilderness. So, they charged me with raping the daughter of the

rancher I worked for.” A short laugh broke from him. Even to his own ears, it rang hollow. “Where they found my lawyer I don’t know, but he was some Texan taking his family north to the Wyoming Territory. They forced him to defend me. He told me he’d rather see me hang.”

“Did you do what they charged you with?”

Jon knew his life hung in the balance on how he answered her pointed question. He slowly shook his head, then looked over at Victoria, levelly meeting her demanding glare. “I never even looked at her, not in that way.”

Victoria pushed off the desk and walked to the door of the jail.

“Telegraph Alva Colbert, Watonga Prison, Indian Territories.” Jon said, trying to swallow the huge knot in his throat. “Though, if you’re going to send that telegram, I’d rather you open this door and kill me clean, with one shot, while I’m trying to escape.”





# Chapter Six

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Victoria stared out the window in the door. She couldn't force her hand to reach for the knob. It all rang true. No one would create such an outlandish and elaborate story and expect it to be believed. It had to be true. He wasn't denying he was Jon Andrews. He wasn't denying he'd escaped prison—not that he could deny that. What he was denying was his guilt.

Still staring out the window, she softly asked, “Did she lie about being raped?”

“It never went to trial.” His voice broke. “Majors—he was my lawyer—told me if it went to trial, I would hang. They offered a deal. He told me it was the best I could hope for. Ten years hard labor in a rock quarry. And I took the deal, so that she wouldn't be forced to lie. A lie would destroy her, because the only way she could have been made to lie was if her father was threatened. He's all she has.”

She craned her head over her shoulder. Jon sat with his elbows on his knees, his much too thin shoulders hunched into himself, head bent to the floor. Against her better judgement, she asked, “What do you mean her father is all she has?”

“Just that. She can't go out in daylight. If she is in sunlight, her skin blisters. I'd been there about a week, and I was in the library of the house—it's the only word to describe it. I asked Carroll if it was all right with him, and when I was done for the day, if I could borrow a book at a time to read. He said I would have to ask Varina, they were her books.”

Victoria couldn't imagine being forced to never go out in the sunshine, to never feel that warmth on her face.

“I hadn't seen her before then. Carroll told me to come back after dark. I could meet his daughter and ask her if I could borrow a book. Her appearance at first is very disconcerting.” Jon slid his hands up his thighs until he sat straighter. “But within minutes, what she looks like doesn't even matter...she is so smart, and so charming. She made me read her favorite book first, before she would allow me to borrow any others from her.”

“What book?” Why the book title mattered, Victoria couldn't say, but somehow, she felt it did.

A hint of a smile was visible through his facial hair. “Browning's

*Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Before I could borrow the next book, we discussed and debated the meaning of nearly every word in those poems.”

She swallowed, trying to mitigate her suddenly dry mouth. Browning’s sonnets didn’t have titles, rather numbers. The numbers stamped onto the horrible metal collar that had been around his neck danced in front of her vision. “What does six-seven-five mean?”

Jon visibly shuddered, and once more huddled into himself, totally defeated. “That’s my release date. June of seventy-five. And for the last three years, it’s been my name.”

Victoria’s stomach knotted and then sank to the soles of her boots. “If I send that telegram, you won’t live to make trial for the death of that guard, will you?”

“The guard was alive when I left him. He was knocked out, but alive. Colbert’s *elite guard*, as he calls them, are his man-hunting dogs.” He remained hunched in a defeated posture. “I didn’t want to kill the dog, but they’re all trained to savage their prey.”

The recollection of his arm torn, punctured, and bloodied slammed into her with the force of a runaway train. He had been hunted, like an animal. Bile rose in the back of her throat. She had to get air.

Victoria opened the door. She froze when he spoke.

“I’m not afraid of dying. A clean shot or even having my neck broke by being hanged is better than how I will die if Colbert takes me back to Watonga.”

She walked out, pulling the door closed behind her. Her head reeled. Her heart felt as if it was being torn to pieces with the conflicting emotions careening through her like so many ricocheted bullets. She needed to talk to someone.

A quick scan of main street didn’t yield any answers. Her father’s horse was hitched outside the church. Paul Grisson was the last person on the face of God’s little green earth she could talk to. He would never understand why she was being torn over this. Deborah Hale and Isaac, the foreman at the Brokken Arrow, were talking to Curt Brokken in front of the general store. As much as she felt Deborah was a friend, this wasn’t a conversation to have with her, either. While Isaac usually had words of wisdom for Deborah, Victoria had never learned to be comfortable revealing personal information to the man.

What she wanted to do was talk to Abigail, but with Abigail’s delivery date imminent, she didn’t want to create any stress for her closest and dearest friend. Victoria shook her head. If she didn’t talk to Abigail about this, Abigail would be deeply hurt. Abigail was the only person she could trust to not repeat a single word to anyone.

She forced herself to walk with a measured tread to the doctor’s home. What she wanted to do was run as if she was a scalded cat. She

let herself in the back door of the impressive, two-story home and immediately heaved a sigh of relief that Abigail was sitting in the kitchen.

“Vic.” Abigail grabbed the table and the back of the chair, attempting to lever herself to her feet.

“Don’t get up.” Victoria shook her head. “Please, don’t.”

“I won’t argue with you.” Abigail sank back into the seat. “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Victoria shook her head, angry with herself for the emotional tears burning her eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

“About Jonathan?” Abigail gestured to a chair across the table from her and added before Victoria could respond, “Grab a cup of coffee, that plate of cookies on the counter, and sit down. I made your favorite sugar cookies.”

Again, Victoria shook her head. “Where are Ethan and Mathew?”

“Ethan is napping, and Mathew is out at the Brokken Arrow. Deb’s grandmother took another spell.” Abigail waved her hand in the general direction of the covered plate on the counter. “Now, grab those cookies, bring them here so I can have one, and sit down. Whatever it is, it’s always easier to talk about with a cookie in your hand.”

To her mortification, Victoria burst into tears. Abigail pushed out of her chair, waddled the few steps to her, and enveloped her in a fierce hug. The hug undid her. She sagged against Abigail, her head on her shoulder, and sobbed. As if from miles away, she heard Abigail’s soft, wordless, comforting murmurs, and was dimly aware she guided her to a chair.

When the worst of her tears subsided, she pressed the cool rag Abigail handed her to her eyes. The aroma of strong coffee wafted to her. She dropped the rag onto the table. A full cup of coffee and the plate of cookies were in front of her.

“Shouldn’t you be in bed? Instead of sitting at the kitchen table and waiting on me?” Victoria couldn’t make herself reach for a cookie.

“Oh, no. Mathew and I have already had this conversation. I am not going to lie in bed waiting for this baby to be born.” Abigail lowered herself into a chair with great difficulty. “Now that we’ve established where I’m not going to be for a while, tell me what’s wrong.”

Victoria drew a deep breath and repeated her conversation with her mother, the small things that gave her pause with the man held in her jail, and what Jon told her a little while earlier. To Abigail’s credit, she didn’t interrupt, other than to ask an occasional question to clarify something. When she finally finished, Victoria reached for a cookie, startled to realize they were all gone. She looked to Abigail in

the face of her friend's uncharacteristic silence.

Abigail stared at the empty plate, but her eyes were unfocused, and her brow knit in concentration. Finally, Abigail blinked, and lifted her head. "You, your mother, and I are the only ones who know he might not be Jonathan English. Do you believe his story?"

"Yes." Victoria should have been surprised with how quickly she answered, but she wasn't. "You hear more gossip than I do—"

"Are you accusing me of gossiping?"

"No." Victoria pushed herself from her chair. "You do hear it, though, because for some reason, everyone in this town tells Mathew everything. I can't imagine he doesn't tell you."

Abigail's cheeks colored but she also didn't deny Mathew shared what he was told. Victoria walked to the stove and picked up the coffee pot, returned to the table, and poured another cup. "How many people are talking about how *Jonathan* came back, and that I've kept him at the jail? Oh, dear Lord, I should have just let Mathew bring him in here."

"What's done is done. From this point on, if you're thinking what I think you are, he's Jonathan. The escaped convict, Jon Andrews, is still on the loose. We can't stop people from talking and speculating about how he came back. Instead, we let them. The more they tell the story, the more it's going to grow, until it can't even be recognized." Abigail sighed. "That means, for him to avoid being named as an escaped convict, he has to leave the jail and move back into *his* house."

Victoria collapsed into the chair. Abigail leaned forward and caught her hand. "I'll ask you again, do you believe him?"

"Yes."

Abigail released her hand. "You need to go take your husband home."

She heaved out a deep breath, then stood. Abigail said, "Vic, if you're wrong and he hurts you in any way, I'll kill him myself."

Before Victoria could answer that in any manner, Ethan scampered into the kitchen. He raced across the floor to Victoria, throwing his arms around her in a hug. "Hi, Aun' 'Toria."

He let go of her and climbed into the chair Victoria had just vacated. He looked at the cookie crumbs on the plate and his face fell. Before the outburst occurred, Victoria said, "I'm sorry, Ethan. I ate all your cookies. I'll take you to Mr. McCoury's tomorrow and buy you a couple of his peppermint sticks."

"Licorice whips, no' peppermin'." Ethan turned his attention to Abigail. "I'm hungry, Momma. Wha's for supper?"

"You are always hungry, Ethan Knight." Abigail's struggle to push herself from the chair further stalled Victoria.

“Do you want me to stay and help with supper?”

Abigail shook her head. “No, thank you. Supper’s in the warmer. You have something to do.”



VICTORIA WALKED TOWARD the jail. Out of habit, she glanced up and down the main street. She slowed and then made her way to the general store. Curt was behind the counter, taking inventory, if the paper pad, pencil, and the notations he made were any indication.

He looked up when she crossed the freshly oiled floor. “What can I do for you, Sheriff?”

Victoria paused at a long table filled with men’s clothing. “I know you aren’t in the habit of extending credit, but I could use a new pair of shoes, trousers, two shirts, and appropriate undergarments for Jon...Jonathan. I’ll pay you when the town pays me the beginning of the mon—”

“Sheriff, my brothers and I, we owe you.” Curt cut her off and set the pad and pencil onto the top of the glass display case. “You take what he needs and between me, Fritz, and Karl, we’ll cover it.”

Victoria’s gaze strayed to the back wall, where half a dozen repeating rifles stood in a display case like so many soldiers. “Thank you. There’s one other thing. I need a deputy, Curt.”

The shop-keep’s silence pulled her attention from the rifles. “I can’t give the badge back to Jonathan until he’s stronger.”

Curt leaned one elbow onto the display case. “Why’s he been locked up in jail, Victoria?”

“I wasn’t sure it was him, until a little while ago.” As it went, it wasn’t exactly a lie. It wasn’t the whole truth, either. Victoria quelled the whisper of her conscience.

“I heard when Doc brought him in, he had to get Peter to strike manacles off his wrists and ankles.”

“Is that the story going ’round?” Victoria hoped her laugh didn’t sound either fake or forced. She picked up a pair of denim trousers she felt would fit Jonat—Jon once he regained his weight. “You know how things get more and more exaggerated with each telling. Anyway, I was thinking, I need a deputy. Someone everyone in town knows, someone level-headed and calm under pressure, and I thought that you’d make a good deputy.”

“What’s it pay?”

“I don’t know yet. I have to take the idea to the town council and get their approval to hire a deputy, and then I’d have to give them a figure for a salary, but if you’re interested, that gives me some leverage.” She added a chambray shirt and a linen shirt to the denims

she held and placed those on the counter. "You wouldn't be away from the store much, either. It would just be when I'd need someone to cover my back."

"I'm interested." Curt pulled the clothing a little closer. "I'll find one of the old receipts and add a pair of boots in his size to this. Want me to add a shaving set, too?"

"Please. And, bring it all to the house later."

"I'll bring it all over on my way back to the ranch after I close up for the night."

Victoria let herself out of the general store, more than surprised to note the lateness of the day. The five-oh-five should be arriving at any moment. A distant whistle, matching the wail earlier from the eleven-thirty, reached her. Her steps took on a determined, rapid rhythm. She'd left Jona—Jon alone, believing she had gone to send a telegram that would seal his fate.

He was still sitting on the edge of the bunk, and he lifted his head when she opened the door. "I've got seventy-two hours, give or take, right?"

Victoria's heart clenched with the desolation shading his eyes and expression. "No."

"Less than that...I guess Colbert's riding horses into the ground to get to the nearest train station to get here." He lowered his head again. "I've heard a bullet to the heart is quick. Usually the person shot is dead before they hit the ground."

"I'm not shooting you, Jon." She walked closer to her desk. This was insanity. Other than his word, her mother's rather faulty intuition, and a few easily explained away differences, she had no manner to prove he wasn't Jonathan English. Except that the same heart her mother had said was so badly scarred it couldn't see the truth kept saying this wasn't Jonathan.

"I guess that would be murder and that would weigh heavy on almost anyone's conscience." He shook his head, desperation entering his voice. "You wouldn't let a rabid dog get killed in the manner he's going to kill me. At least have the same pity for me you'd have for that dog."

She picked up the keys and unlocked the door. "He's not coming. We're going home."





# Chapter Seven

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Jon snapped his head up and over to her. “Home?”

“I believe you.” She pulled the door open and stepped to a side. “I believe that you didn’t do any of the crimes you were accused of doing. And, I’m breaking every promise I ever made about being a sheriff by doing this.”

He forced himself to stand but his feet wouldn’t move toward the opened door. “Home?”

She nodded, a long strand of hair falling along the side of her cheek from the loosely gathered bun. “Home. It’s a walk in your shape, but I’ll help. It won’t be the first time people will see me helping my husband stagger home.”

“He drank?” Jon managed one step closer to the freedom offered.

A smile painted with deep sadness brushed along her lips for a moment. “Every time he would lose his temper and hit me, he would go to the saloon.”

So, the bastard drank after beating on her. Probably bragged about putting his wife in her place. Jon’s stomach flipped with that thought. Another step and he was close enough to touch her. He looked down into her face, into dark eyes the color of rich, warm coffee. He slid his unbandaged hand into his pocket to keep from brushing that long strand of dark chocolate hair off her cheek. “I don’t drink. I never did. I don’t intend to start. I’ll go back to Watonga before I’ll ever raise my hand to hurt you.”

Her audible gulp let him know how difficult this was for her. A watery smile brushed her lips. “I may be a fool for this, but I believe you.”

Jon turned his gaze to the still open door of the jail. “Which way once we’re out the door?”

Victoria gestured to the street. “Right for half a block, and then left. The house is six houses up on the right.”

As much as he wanted to walk without her assistance, Jon had to accept Victoria’s steadying arm around his waist before they had turned onto the street she said was Austin. “How much farther?”

She pointed to a small, modest house mid-block. “It’s right there.”

Victoria’s arm tightened on him when a graying, imposing man rode closer. She tilted her head to his ear and said, “My father, Pastor

Paul Grisson. Jonathan always called him Paul.”

Though his head was spinning, and he was light-headed and shaking with exhaustion, Jon recognized her assistance to avoid a slip that could call into question his identity.

“Jonathan,” Grisson said, as he drew his horse to a halt. “I’m thankful to see Victoria came to her senses and released you from jail.”

He caught the clenching of her jaw in the corner of his eye. “Afternoon, Paul.”

“Father, I’d like to get Jonathan home. He’s still very weak.”

Jon took the less than subtle hint and took another step closer to the house. Grisson reined the horse out of their way. Jon glanced up at Grisson, adding his own excuse to be away from the man. “I’m just not fit company yet, Paul.”

“I’ll be around in a day or two. We’ll talk more then.”

“Looking forward to it,” Jon managed.

By the time Victoria helped him stagger into the house, Jon shook with exhaustion. Her strength kept him upright until he collapsed onto a large, over-stuffed chesterfield in what he assumed was a formal parlor. He didn’t even have the strength to sit upright and fell to his side.

He let his eyes slide shut as he struggled to catch his breath. The front door closed, the sound of the latch catching carrying to him. Her footsteps faded as she made her way deeper into the interior of the house. When the sound of her footfalls returned, he almost had his breathing leveled.

Her cool hand brushed his sweat-soaked hair from his brow. “I’ve brought you a glass of lemonade. I’ll help you sit up.”

“I can manage.”

“I was just offering to help.”

The tightness in her voice forced his eyes open. He levered himself into a sitting position and offered what he hoped to be a sufficiently chagrined smile. “I wasn’t snapping at you. I appreciate your help, Vic.”

She sat on the ottoman directly in front of him, running her fingers up the glass, wiping away condensation. “This is hard for me.”

“I’m not him.” He leaned forward and captured her hand between his and the cool glass. Her sharp inhalation with the simple contact was enough to warn him to tread carefully. He took the glass from her and balanced it on his knee, holding it steady in his hand. “I will need your help if people are going to believe I am him.”

Even though she didn’t lift her gaze to him, she nodded. Jon waited for her to look at him, and when she didn’t, he said, “I need you to see me. Not him. If this is going to work, you have to trust me

as much as I'm trusting you."

In degrees she raised her gaze. So much pain and uncertainty filled her expression Jon felt it knife into his own chest. She caught her lower lip between her teeth as she studied his face. Hesitantly, she reached her hand out to run a fingertip down his nose.

"Your nose is a little different."

He cocked his head to a side. "It's been broken several times over the last few years."

She blanched and pulled her hand back. "What else?"

"My collar bone, my arm, several ribs." He wanted to take her hand into his again but didn't. Instinctively he knew she had to come to him.

Her gaze dropped to the glass balanced on his knee. "How did you get here?"

"After I escaped, I traveled in a creek. I waded or swam for what I'm guessing was about a mile." Jon lifted the glass and drained it. The rain swollen creek had almost taken his life more than once on that arduous swim, hampered as he was with both wrist and ankle shackles. "I found a homesteader's place and tried to break the shackles off. They had a dog, so I had to run again, though I managed to break a link in the chain between the ankle shackles. A little farther on down, I stole a horse and I backtracked, hoping to throw the search off. I let the horse go after a couple of hours, stole another one, and headed straight south. I let that one go, too, after a couple of hours, and followed another creek."

"How long did it take you to get from there to here?"

"I don't know. I'm guessing about two weeks. I kept backtracking, doing anything I could to throw the searchers off." Jon heaved out a deep breath. "I did things I'm not proud of. I stole three horses—the last one went lame. I stole food when I came across a farm or homestead. That wasn't often because I stayed far away from people."

Victoria lifted her gaze to him again. "Why here?"

He had asked himself that same question so many times over the course of his flight from Watonga. "I don't know. I don't even know why I kept both your locket and letter. Somehow, when things were at their worst, your letter gave me a little bit of comfort, that there was a woman waiting for her man to come home and there was still decency and gentleness and kindness left in the world. Maybe, I came here to tell you he wasn't worth waiting for. I don't know why I came here. I just knew I had to be here."

Jon startled with a sudden knock and sought an avenue of escape. Victoria stood. "That'll be Curt."

He forced himself to relax.

She paused before going to the front door. "You said we have to

trust one another. Trust me.”

When she pulled the door open, she announced brightly, “Curt, thank you. I do appreciate you bringing this here for Jonathan.” Victoria led their visitor into the parlor. “Jonathan, I hope you don’t mind, but I asked Curt to bring a few things for you from the general store. If you don’t like what I asked Curt to put together, I’m sure we can exchange it, right, Curt?”

Everything in her demeanor had changed, as if somehow a mouse had taken her place. The slender, dapper-dressed man shot a pointed glance in his direction, and Jon knew her greeting had been too cheerful, too bright. What was this? Jon struggled to push himself to his feet. Victoria was at his side before he could manage to stand, assisting him. “I can manage,” he repeated.

“I’m sorry,” she said on a whisper so bare he almost missed it.

“It’s all right, Victoria.” If he hoped his assurance would calm her, it did the exact opposite. Every vestige of her color drained from her face and she ducked her head even as she scrambled a few steps away.

“Jonathan, you don’t look like you’re up to having any visitors. I’ll stop by in a few days.” Curt dipped his head to Victoria. “I can show myself out.”

Before the door closed, Jon fell into the chesterfield again. Victoria stood in the doorway between the foyer and the parlor, arms wrapped around herself. He stared at her for several long moments. “What in the name of heaven was that performance?”

Victoria shook herself as if she had been startled from a daydream. Or a nightmare. “Please, don’t yell,” she whispered, then turned on a heel and fled deeper into the house.

A door in the back of the house slammed. As much as he wanted to follow her and demand an explanation, he didn’t have the energy or the strength. He threw his head back onto the chesterfield and waited.

“I’m sorry.” Her apology woke him out of a dozing, not-awake and not-asleep state. She stood in the doorway, judging by where the words sounded, to aid in her escape, should it be needed.

Jon’s stomach sank. He didn’t open his eyes or lift his head. “Stop apologizing for everything and tell me what just happened.”

“Before the War, Curt and Jonathan argued politics a lot.” She fell silent and the weight of that silence grew. Apparently, his doppelganger had a nasty temper, in addition to being a drunk, and when he couldn’t vent his anger in one direction, he heaped abuse onto his wife.

“And, after the political discussions, Jonathan mistook you for a punching bag.” He finally looked over at her. If misery was personified, it was Victoria. “Let me guess, Curt was pro-Union.”

She shook head, staring at the floor. “Curt favored states’ rights,

but he was opposed to slavery. He felt if the South could win, there were enough in the South who could abolish slavery. Jonathan was very pro-slavery and he hated anyone who wasn't white."

"Are you telling me, I now have to act as if I was in favor of fighting a war to preserve slavery? Worse than that, I have to assume the mantle of one who favored that sickening ideology?"

"I'm sor—yes, if people are going to believe you're him, you'll have to do that."

Jon stared at her. "I was an abolitionist and because I felt so strongly about preserving the Union and ending that utterly abhorrent practice, I enlisted in violation of the strongest tenant of my Quaker beliefs and was shunned and disowned by my very family for violating that tenant."

The recollection of his mother tearfully pleading with him not to leave, reminding him he would no longer be a part of his own family, and that he would be alone clawed at him, still with enough power to leave him feeling bloodied.

Victoria twisted the badge pinned to her blouse, an action he recognized as a nervous gesture. Jon managed a long, deep breath and eased it out and then said, "I guess war changes a man and his way of thinking."



VICTORIA EASED THE front door open and crept into the house. A quick survey of the parlor and her sight fell on Jon, sound asleep on the chesterfield, one arm over his stomach, the other wrapped around the top of his head. She studied his still form in the dim light of a low-pitched lamp. In spite of his claim he was ravenous before supper, he had merely picked at his food, and fallen asleep at the table halfway through the meal. As she pushed the door closed, Jon said, "Where did you go?"

Jon. Not Jonathan. She calmed her racing heart. "I make one last round of the town about this time of night."

"You take that badge and position seriously, don't you?" Springs in the chesterfield creaked as he sat up.

"Yes, I do." She closed half the distance between them and twisted the stem on the lamp, raising the illumination in the room.

He shaded his eyes against the raised light and pulled a hand down the lower half of his face. He shook his head and when that didn't move the long strands off his brow, he shoved his hand through his hair. "Would it be too presumptuous of me to ask if there are any leftovers from supper?"

"No, not at all. You fell asleep before you could try my peach

cobbler.”

He shoved the hair off his brow again. “Coffee, too?”

“Of course. I’ll go start a fresh pot—”

“You don’t have to do that. If there’s any left on the stove, that’ll be fine.” The sleep roughened rasp from his voice faded. “I’ll come into the kitchen in a few minutes.”

Victoria crossed the room and set her hand on his shoulder. Her impression when she assisted him that afternoon to walk from the jail to the house was he was no more than skin and bones. She hoped she hid her dismayed reaction when her fingers curled over his shoulder. Her impression was accurate. “I’ll bring your coffee and cobbler to you.”

A smile broke through his facial hair. “Keep coddling me like this and I might get used to it.”

She recognized the smile for what it was, an attempt to hide his own dismay at his physical short comings. “I’m not coddling you. I’m merely assisting in your recovery.”

The smile grew and crinkled the lines at the corners of his eyes. “Cream and sugar for that coffee, too?”

“Yes.” She walked to the kitchen and pulled a bowl from the cabinet. She was spooning a generous dollop of the cobbler into a bowl when Jon’s unsteady steps entered the kitchen. She spun around and raced across the floor, catching him as his knees buckled. “What were you thinking?” she demanded as she helped him into a chair. “I said I’d bring the cobbler and coffee to you.”

“I’m thinking you hugged me.”

Victoria gaped open-mouthed at him, snapped her mouth closed, and gaped again. He couldn’t walk from the parlor to the kitchen without shaking in exhaustion, but he was flirting with her? “I stopped you from falling flat on your face.”

“You can tell it that way. I prefer my version.”

The amusement in his voice lowered the timbre, added a warmth to the words that settled deep in her and set her stomach fluttering. Sparks danced in the depths of his eyes. She admitted she liked how the laugh lines at his eyes deepened with his amusement. With that admission came a sudden rush of anger for her foolish reaction to the charm oozing from the man sitting at her table. Jonathan had been just as charming. “Your version is a blatant lie.”

A low chuckle broke from him. Even angrier for how quickly her heart raced—and certainly not with fear—with that laugh, she stabbed a spoon into the cobbler and then slapped the bowl onto the table in front of him. “Stop flirting with me.”

He didn’t even glance at the cobbler. Instead, he unleashed a blazing smile. “You can’t deny you had your arms around me.”

A chipped tooth marred his smile, but it made him even more dangerous to her equilibrium and her heart. She gaped at him again, cursing her fluttering stomach, her racing heart, even the warmth pooling in her.

“You forgot the coffee.” His smile flashed again.

“I should tell you to get it yourself, but you would try.” Victoria poured the brew. She made the mistake of meeting his gaze when she set the cup on the table. Despite the exhaustion lining his face, it wasn’t exhaustion warming his eyes and deepening the blue.

He caught her wrist before she could move away. “If it would guarantee your arms around me again, I certainly would try.”

To her relief and surprising disappointment, he let her easily extract her wrist. Hoping to hide how flustered he made her, she muttered, “Oh, eat your cobbler.”





# Chapter Eight

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Victoria woke, not sure what had jarred her from her slumber. She stared into the darkness, listening for anything that might be out of the ordinary and wondered if she should go to the parlor and determine if what woke her had woke Jon, as well. Her thoughts roamed over the past two weeks.

The first few days it seemed all Jon did was sleep, though it was far from a deep sleep. The slightest sound woke him in an absolute panic, fists drawn back, ready to fight whatever threat—real or perceived—might be present. A wild animal caught in a leghold trap wasn't as frantic as he was in those first moments after waking. When he finally did slip into a deep sleep, he slept for twenty hours straight.

In the past three days, he made much needed repairs to the house. He fixed the leak in the ceiling over the kitchen, even though she protested he should not be on either a ladder or the roof in his weakened condition. He climbed up anyway. He replaced the rotting steps on the back porch, repaired the hand pump in the bathing room, and rigged up an ingenious system of a large boiler and copper wire to heat the water in the bathing room, rather than either of them being forced to carry buckets of hot water from the kitchen. With the convenience his water heating system provided, Victoria hinted to Jon he could shave off his facial hair.

She rolled onto her side, hugging a pillow. Her surprise when he went to the barber the next morning turned into dismay on his return. With his hair neatly cut and both beard and mustache trimmed tight, Jon's resemblance to Jonathan was more pronounced, so much so that when he started shadowing her three days ago, not one person questioned his identity. Abigail appeared visibly shaken when she saw Jon.

Victoria had almost drifted back to sleep when she heard a creaking of the floorboards on the back porch outside her window. The darkness didn't hamper her unerring reach for her revolver left prominently on the night stand. The smooth walnut of the grip warmed as soon as she took it into her hand. Keeping as quiet as possible, she slipped from the bed and padded on bare feet across her room.

She eased the door open and cautiously peered into the kitchen.

The back door stood partially ajar. Avoiding the floorboard that creaked in the kitchen floor, she made her way to the opened door, flung it open and burst out, gun drawn up and pointed into the chest of the shadow in the far corner of the porch.

Jon flung his hands up. "Don't shoot."

Victoria stared at him. He was fully clothed, right down to the shoes on his feet. "What are you doing out at this time of the night?"

"I couldn't sleep." He stepped out of the darkness, his hands still held shoulder high, palms toward her. "Would you mind lowering your weapon?"

She eased the hammer home, and then let the revolver down. Jon dropped his hands but didn't come closer. "What are you doing out at this hour of the night?" she asked, again.

"I hoped some fresh air would alleviate the headache that woke me. I couldn't go back to sleep, so I came out here." The white of his shirt was a stark contrast to the darkness while he paced in the shadows, reminding her of a caged tiger she had seen in a travelling circus, pacing the perimeter of his cage, never still. "I feel useless. It doesn't help everyone in town looks at me like I'm some sort of monster."

The words to soothe whatever angry beast raged in his chest wouldn't come. Jonathan had been a monster and not only to her. She tried to distract him. "I could always use a deputy and I haven't gotten an answer from Curt."

A derisive snort filled the humid air. "I don't have the temperament for that job."

"What does that mean?"

"To be able to effectively operate in that role, a certain amount of trust is involved." His agitated pacing slowed to a stop, and he gripped the railing. "Perhaps, that's the answer. I need to do something. For the last three years, I was woken before the dawn, carted to a quarry, and worked until there wasn't enough light left to see to swing a sledge." As if the memory of that time goaded him, he started pacing again.

Rather than offering suggestions, Victoria sat on the swing suspended from the porch ceiling and looked out across the open expanse between the house and the end of town. Shadows shifted and danced while clouds scudded across the face of the moon.

"I know how to work cattle." He stood stock still, his back to her. "I could work for one of the ranches around here."

"The Brokken Arrow needs help. Deb's brothers are good with figures but not so good with cattle." The ribbon lacing at the wrist of her nightdress drew her attention. The end was fraying, a long thread begging to be pulled. And, if she did that, the whole ribbon would

unravel. She plucked at it anyway, the thread unraveling in a zig-zigging manner. "I could talk to Isaac."

"No. *I'll* talk to Isaac."

That was the problem. He chafed at his dependency on her. However, Jon talking to Isaac presented another serious issue. "Jonathan hated Isaac. He didn't understand why the Brokken family gave so much authority to a black man or how they could trust him around their daughter. He was also certain Isaac's intelligence was no different than teaching a difficult trick to a well-trained dog. Those were his exact words."

"I suppose Jonathan's miraculous transformation can start with Isaac." The thick cloud covering the moon slipped past and Jon's posture visibly slumped. Lines of black scored the back of his hand, dripping from his fingers. A soft pattering, like the first raindrops of a rain shower, tapped a slow cadence. To her horror, she realized it was blood dripping. "What happened to your hand?"

Jon looked down and flexed his hand. "Those bite wounds haven't fully healed. I must have scratched a couple open when I walked into the climbing rose over there."

Victoria's sight shifted immediately to the rose staking its claim to the corner of the porch. There were times, when she was trimming it, she wondered if the heady, fragrant blooms were worth the deep scratches she got. She knew, from first-hand experience, just how painful those thorns were. "You didn't notice you were scratched?"

"Not until right now."

Victoria unsuccessfully stifled a yawn. She stood, the glider slowly moving behind her. "Are you going to be out here for long?"

He paced the floor again. "I don't know. I'm restless, and I don't think I could manage to fall asleep again."

"Do you want me stay up with you?" If he did, the first thing she needed to do was make a fresh pot of coffee.

His pacing came to a halt, and he slowly turned to her. In the silvered darkness, his resemblance to Jonathan was uncanny. And terrifying. "Are you asking so you can make sure I don't bolt and run?"

"No." She hated the tremor in her voice. An old, sickened sensation invaded the pit of her stomach. A cold sweat dripped the length of her spine. "I was...I just asked..."

His sigh rippled to her. "Go back to bed. I'll be here in the morning."



JON REINED THE LIVERY horse up on the edge of town. Straight out

the road, Victoria said, and he'd come to the main house for the Brokken Arrow ranch. Or, he could keep on riding and not look back. If he wasn't back that night, would Victoria order up a posse and come after him? He knew the answer to that as well as he knew the back of his hand.

His sight dropped to the scratches running the length of his hand. He had to have scratched himself on the rose, though he didn't remember rising from the chesterfield, dressing, or going out the back. When the door slammed against the clapboard with Victoria shoving it open, and startling him to full awareness, he'd been confused and more than concerned to realize he was on the porch.

As a child, he'd been afflicted with episodes of sleep-walking. He hoped that disorder hadn't returned. When the sleep-walking had occurred as a child, it was usually after a particularly distressing event happened—the loss of his beloved grandmother to apoplexy; failure to save a friend from drowning when they had disobeyed their parents and had explored a newly frozen river; assuming the adult responsibility for putting his pony out of its misery when he asked the little gelding to jump a fence much too high and the result was two broken bones—his arm and the pony's leg.

Sitting in the middle of the road, searching for answers to a riddle without clues, wasn't getting him to the Brokken Arrow. Delaying ingesting a healthy portion of crow pie for things he hadn't done wasn't getting him there, either. If he was going to transform Jonathan English, asking for pardon from Isaac Iverson was the best place to start. He put his heels into the horse.

When the ranch house came into view, Jon didn't know if he should laugh or tuck tail and run. Victoria hadn't been joking with him when she said he couldn't mistake the place for anything else. The house rose on a small hillock. Two stories of dark, elaborate and ornate woodwork, a high-pitched roof, and narrow, tall windows all combined to create a forbidding and imposing appearance.

He rode into the yard. Before he could dismount, he was met by a man about his age descending from the deeply shaded porch. "Can I help you?"

Jon swung off the horse and dropped one rein. "I'm looking for Mr. Iverson."

"Last I saw Isaac, he was in the barn, greasing the bearings on the buggy." The other man gave Jon a cursory once over. "You're Jonathan English."

"Yeah." The word felt as if it choked him. He'd already met the three Brokken brothers, so this couldn't be another Brokken. "You are?"

"Chance Hale." Chance wrapped a hand around the back of his

neck, his head dipping, as if he didn't like offering his name any more than Jon liked offering up he was Jonathan English.

Jon knew that name. Men on both sides of the conflict knew of Hale, his proficiency as a Sharpshooter, even the extreme risks he took to get a killing shot. "Not a chance in hale? That Chance Hale?"

Hale's expression shuttered faster than a dowager could clutch her pearls before falling onto a fainting couch. "War's over. Isaac's in the barn, if you want him." Hale turned on a heel and walked away without another word, retreating to the shadows of the large porch.

Jon's horse shook its head, sputtering as if laughing. Jon heard the door slam. He blew out a short breath. Yep, he was off to a good start. He picked up the drop rein and led the horse around the house to the barn.

The barn, like the house, could have been on any Pennsylvania Dutch homestead back East. The interior was cool and filled with the scents Jon associated with a well-used barn—hay, leather, warm bodies, and even fresh manure. The aroma brought back all the pleasant times growing up that he'd spent in his family's barn.

A buggy was braced high enough the wheels on one side would have been clear of the ground if they were still attached to the vehicle, and an aging black man bent under the frame, a bucket of grease in one hand, a thick brush dripping with goo in the other.

"Mr. Iverson."

Isaac Iverson backed out from under the buggy. His eyes widened for the space of a heartbeat. "Mr. English." His expression cleared. "Or is it back to being Sheriff English?"

"Mister is fine." Jon cleared his throat. "Actually, Jonathan would be even better."

Iverson's brows arched upward. "All right, Jonathan. What brings you to the Brokken Arrow?"

"Two things." Jon scanned the rafters for a few moments, and then brought his gaze back to the Brokken Arrow's foreman. He cleared his throat again. "I owe you an apology. My previous behavior toward you and my words about you were not becoming of a gentleman and were unwarranted." *Please, Lord, let that sound enough like him.*

"Secondly—"

"Doesn't it rather stick in your craw, trying to be someone you aren't?"

An icy fist clenched around Jon's heart. How did this man know he wasn't Jonathan? "Excuse me?"

"You don't believe you did anything wrong. You're not apologizing because your heart has changed." With a deliberation bordering on melodramatic, Iverson pushed the brush into the metal bucket.

"Without a change of heart, Mr. English—"

“Jonathan, please, Mr. Iverson.” Jon struggled to keep his relief hidden. Iverson wasn’t questioning his identity, merely his sincerity.

Iverson’s brow knit, and his lips pursed. He set the metal bucket on the running board of the buggy, and then wiped his hands on a rag tucked into the waist of his dirty denims.

In the face of Iverson’s continued silence, Jon stuck his hand out to the foreman. “Can we agree that a war such as the one we recently emerged from changes a man’s thoughts and perspective? I truly and deeply regret my previous words and actions.”

Iverson’s gaze dropped to Jon’s extended hand. The pursing of his lips eased and a short, huff of a breath flared his nostrils. He took Jon’s hand and shook it. “You had a second reason to be here?”

Jon nodded. He didn’t wipe off the residual grease that transferred from Iverson’s hand to his. That could be construed in an unfavorable light. “Yes. Victoria and I have talked. For now, I don’t want to resume wearing the sheriff’s badge, but I need to do something productive.” If he had startled the man earlier, this revelation moved into the realm of disbelief. “Being the sheriff involves a certain amount of trust between the town’s folk and me. I don’t know most of the newcomers. Victoria knows them, and she has their trust.”

Iverson bent and picked up the bucket. “So, you’re looking for a job at the Broken Arrow?”

“Yes, sir.”

Iverson snapped his head up. Jon wondered what had created that reaction and then he realized he had addressed the black man as “sir.” Perhaps, if nothing else, that might convince the foreman of *Jonathan’s* change of heart.

“Can you work cattle?” The foreman crouched under the buggy again, slopping grease onto the underside bearings.

“After the war, I worked for a time on a ranch.”

Iverson paused, seemingly frozen, and then resumed greasing the wheel bearings. “You’ll be working for and taking orders from me. Will that be a problem for you?”

“No, sir. No problem at all.”

The foreman set the bucket down again and straightened. He brought his hard, penetrating gaze to Jon. “If I hire you, I will not cut you any slack. You’ll start at first light and there are some days, we don’t quit until it’s dark. If the moon’s full, we’ve been known to work through the night. You’ll start out at greenhorn pay, ten dollars and fifty cents a month.”

He’d broken rocks in the prison chain gang by the light of a full moon, simply for the privilege of being allowed to continue to breathe. Jon nodded. “That’s acceptable, Mr. Iverson.”

“Good. And, until I say so, it will remain ‘Mr. Iverson’ to you,

English.”

“Yes, sir.” Jon didn’t know if he should ask permission to leave or if he should just go.

Iverson settled the question for him. He pulled the rag from his waistband and tossed it to Jon. “Wipe the grease off your hands. Tell your wife she might not be seeing much of you in the next few weeks. I’ll see you tomorrow morning at first light.”

“Yes, sir.”





# Chapter Nine

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Victoria stared down into a half-empty cup of coffee, contemplating why the coffee here in the jail tasted so differently from the coffee she brewed at the house. She used the same beans, the same water, yet it had a different taste. With a snort, she downed another swallow. It wasn't the art of brewing coffee she knew she considered, but as long as she wondered about the differences, she didn't brood unnecessarily about what could be happening at the Brokken Arrow. Don't borrow trouble, her mother always told her.

Still, Jon hadn't returned from the Brokken Arrow. If he'd found Isaac there, she could imagine the foreman wouldn't be giving him the slightest leeway. She supposed she should feel some sympathy for Jon having to apologize for Jonathan's actions. It wasn't sympathy she felt, though, but rather concern. If he made a mistake, Isaac would be the first to realize he wasn't Jonathan.

The rattling of the doorknob pulled her thoughts from the different scenarios which could be playing out at the Brokken Arrow. David Landry shoved the door of the jail building open, his face already twisting in a snarl. Victoria ceased her contemplation of her cold coffee and set the cup down but refused to pull her feet off the desk top. "What's the problem today, Mr. Landry?"

"Where's your husband?"

"He's not here." Landry didn't need to know Jon was at the Brokken Arrow. "Why do you want Jonathan?"

"I'm hoping he'll pin that badge on, again. Someone needs to start taking the job seriously. Someone needs to do something about that cougar Deborah Brokken insists we leave alone."

If she had taken this job seriously, Landry wouldn't be demanding to see Jon, as he'd be back in the prison in Watonga. Victoria silenced that tiny whisper. She had warned Deborah more than a year ago that demanding people leave the mountain lion alone was asking for trouble, especially as brazen as the big cat seemed to be. "Deborah is married to Mr. Hale, so she is now Deborah Hale."

"I don't care if her name is Mrs. Jefferson Davis. Someone has to do something about that mountain lion she's trying to turn into a housecat." Landry leaned onto the desk, until he was nearly nose to nose with her. "Last night, that cat got one of my hunting dogs. Either

you do something about it, or I will. It could have just as easily been my wife or my boy.”

“Move back, Mr. Landry.” Victoria didn’t budge an inch, even though every instinct screamed in warning, and the urge to roll the chair away from him was almost overwhelming.

Landry didn’t give ground, either. “Are you going to do something about that cougar?”

“Move back,” Victoria repeated, this time dropping her hand onto the grip of her revolver. The moment her fingers curled over the cool walnut, the quivering in her stomach and chest eased. “Now.”

Landry pushed away from her, his face contorting further in his anger. As calmly as she could, Victoria picked up her coffee cup and managed a long, deliberate sip. “What do you want me to do, Mr. Landry? I can’t go serve an arrest warrant on a mountain lion.”

“Shoot the thing.” Landry stared at her as if she had completely lost all leave of her senses. “Hunt it down and shoot it.”

“How will I know I’ve shot the right one?” Another deliberate sip of the cold coffee. “I can’t imagine your other dogs not sounding an alarm if it was a big cat, so why didn’t you shoot it?”

“I...I...I wasn’t home when it happened. I was here, in the saloon.” The starch left Landry’s blustering.

“How do you even know it was a big cat, then? Do any of your other dogs have any injuries? I’d think, if it was a cougar, the other dogs would have tried to take it down. You do use them for hunting cougar and bear, don’t you?”

“You ain’t going to do anything, are you, because that crazy woman thinks that blasted cougar is her guardian angel?” Landry turned to the door. “I’ll have to take care of it, even though this is part of your job.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t take care of it. I want to be sure I’m going to be hunting for the right animal.” Dealing with nuisance wildlife was the part of the job that Victoria hated, and she never fully understood why Jonathan had allowed that to be added to the duties of the sheriff. Resolving the issue of any nuisance animal made her feel as if she was no more than a glorified rat-catcher. “I don’t want to kill an animal that isn’t a problem.”

“It’s a cougar. They’re all problems, especially when they come this close to town.” The man looked at her as if she had completely taken leave of her senses. “That cat tore my dog’s throat and stomach out. Only thing it ate was the dog’s heart.”

A chill cascaded over Victoria. That wasn’t normal behavior for a cougar. It wasn’t normal behavior for any predator.

“Either you kill it, Sheriff, or I will.”



JON PULLED TWO PLATES from the warmer when he heard Victoria enter the house through the front door. He put both on the table with a flourish when she walked into the kitchen.

Her gaze skimmed over the set table, pausing for a few seconds on the wildflowers he'd stopped to gather and placed in a tall glass of water in the center. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips thinned as she continued to study the arrangement. "What's all this?" The edge in her voice took him back.

"I stopped at Molly's and got supper." He gestured to the plates heaped with fried potatoes, green beans, and pork chops. "I knew you were at the jail most of the day and I...I just wanted to help."

"Did you charge it to the jail?" She threw her hat onto the counter and picked up the coffee pot. A moment later, she slammed it down onto the stove top.

He'd forgotten to start a fresh pot of coffee. "No. I talked to Molly, and she started a bill for me. I'll pay it when I get paid."

"Great. Another bill." Victoria picked up the pot again, seemed to realize what she did and this time when she banged the empty pot onto the stove, the clang reverberated in the tension filled air.

Jon shook his head. This was an interesting role reversal for most couples. "I thought we could celebrate a little. I'm gainfully employed."

She didn't seem to hear him as she stared out the window over the sink. She hadn't heard half of what he said, he decided.

"Where were you last night?" The question sounded like the first barrage in an interrogation.

"I didn't go anywhere last night. I told you. I woke up. I couldn't sleep after that, so I went out onto the porch." He closed half the distance between them. "What is this all about?"

She dipped her head and her shoulders slumped. "So, you don't know anything about David Landry's dead dog?"

"Why would I?" Jon took another step closer, then halted. His stomach knotted with an unnamed fear. "I don't even know who he is. Vic, what's this all about?"

Her shoulders rounded even further. "Maybe, it's nothing."

He caught her arm at the elbow and pulled her around to face him. "Whatever it is, if you're doubting me, I need to know. I need to know so I can try to remove your doubts."

"How did you scratch your hand?" She lifted her gaze to him. The warmth usually in her dark brown eyes was gone, and what remained was as hard as chert.

This was definitely an interrogation. The knots in his gut

tightened, expanded into his chest, constricting around his heart. He released her elbow and glanced at the back of his hand. "I don't know. I'm pretty sure I did it when I got too close to that rose bush, but I don't remember it." With a flash of insight, he realized what she thought. "Why would I kill someone's dog?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." Her gaze skipped over his features. A tight, mirthless smile dusted her lips. "You shaved your beard and mustache off. It completely changes your appearance."

He wasn't certain what to say to her observation that sounded remarkably like an accusation. He settled for the obvious. "You didn't like the beard and mustache."

Victoria sucked in a sharp breath. "Tell me again how you got here. This time, tell me where you went after you escaped Watonga."

"Why don't I save both of us some time?" His temper reached its breaking point. "I'll just go to the telegraph office and wire Colbert now, so you don't have to. I don't know what's made you suddenly doubt everything I've told you, but something did."

He turned and stalked to the back door. Victoria caught him before he could pull the door open and grabbed his wrist, halting him.

"I'm over-reacting, because a cougar didn't act normal." The harsh undertone to her voice was gone and the hardness in her eyes softened. "One of Landry's dogs was killed by a big cat, and it didn't take the whole kill."

"If it was a cougar, why did you assume I was involved?"

She drew in another breath, this one long and unsteady. "Landry said the cat ripped the dog's throat out, and all it ate was the dog's heart. Something about that made me think of how you said Jonathan killed those men during Tullahoma."

"And you think I lied to you about everything—even about Jonathan's involvement with the murder of those men?" He pulled his wrist free of her encircling hand. "I realize that my life as your husband is completely predicated on a lie, but I haven't lied to you about anything."

Her stricken gaze fell to the floor.

"My immediate commanding officer was Tim Minor. Last I heard, he was practicing law in Evansville, Indiana. He'll tell you it was me. But it couldn't have been because English left his shell jacket with me when he took mine. The name of the ranch I worked at was the Tumbling M, owned by Martin Carroll. A year ago, Carroll knew he was dying. He came forward, trying to get me released early, testifying I never touched his daughter." Jon sucked in a shaking breath. "For all I know, he's gone now. Colbert made it a point to tell me about Carroll's attempts to get me released early. I don't want to go back to Watonga, but if I have to, to prove to you I'm not lying

about any of this, I will.” He hoped he had been reading her right, and she wouldn’t take that offer on face value.

Victoria snapped her head up, dislodging several lengths of hair to fall over her furrowed brow. Jon raised his hand and gently brushed the hair off her face. “The only men I killed in that war were the ones shooting back at me.”

“I believe you.” The words sounded on a breathless whisper.

He slipped his hand around the back of her neck, drawing her minutely closer. She stilled but didn’t resist him. Jon leaned into her, his gaze dropping to her lips. Her mouth parted, and she pressed her palm against his shoulder, not pushing him away but not drawing him closer, either.

The shrill yapping of a small dog a few houses away intruded into the stillness between them. Reluctantly, he lowered his hand and stepped back, putting distance between them.

“Lavender and her collection of critters. You wouldn’t believe the complaints I’ve gotten about her barking dogs.” A rueful, half-smile curled her lips. “I’ve spoiled supper.”

Jon lifted his shoulders. “No, you didn’t. It should still be warm.”

Victoria tilted her head toward the table. “It looks good and smells even better. You said you’re gainfully employed now.”

“Yes.” He allowed the less than tactful change of subject, grateful she moved away from her doubts and took her arm just above the elbow. Gentle pressure guided her toward the table. “Instead of discussing how good it looks, let’s find out. Either Molly or her husband slaved for hours in a hot kitchen to make that meal. And, we can talk about how proud you are of your *husband* for securing a job as a greenhorn wrangler at the Brokken Arrow.”

Jon wasn’t prepared for Victoria to suddenly stand on tiptoe or for the quick kiss she left on his clean-shaven cheek. Before he could catch her in his arms and pull her into him for a proper kiss, she backed away.

He stared at her for a long moment, noting the color—like one of his mother’s deep red roses—creeping across her cheeks. He asked, “What was that for?”

The bloom of color deepened. “Because I am very thankful you’re not him.”



# Chapter Ten

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Jon ran full out the last short distance to the Brokken Arrow. He skittered to a halt in the middle of the yard, and dropping his hands onto his knees, struggled to catch his breath. Several horses were saddled and tied at the hitching rail outside of the barn. Before he had leveled his breathing, Isaac and four hands emerged from the main house.

Isaac said, his voice taut, "You're late, English."

Jon forced himself to stand upright and threw a glance at the eastern skies. The sun hadn't even fully crested over the horizon. It was just a little past first light. "Yes, sir, I am."

"Where's your horse?" the foreman demanded.

Jon recognized Hale as the man walked past him, though Hale didn't give him any eye contact. The other three he didn't know. "The livery was closed when I left the house. I didn't want to take a horse and risk being accused of stealing one."

Iverson walked closer to Jon. "You didn't think to tell Mrs. Walsh you would need one early today?"

He wasn't off to the best start. Jon shook his head. "No, sir, I didn't. I'll make arrangements for a mount this evening, when I go back to town."

"Come on, Boss," one of the now mounted wranglers said. "We're burning daylight."

The quirk of Iverson's mouth could have been amusement, though Jon wasn't willing to wager on that. "Nothing sadder than a wrangler without a horse, English. So, I can either tell you to hit the road—"

Jon braced himself for his immediate dismissal.

"—or I can give you something to do that will help reinforce your need of a horse for this job. What do you think, gentlemen? Should I give Mr. English another chance?"

"Barn needs cleaned," Hale said, still not meeting Jon's gaze. "None of us want to do it, but it needs done."

Iverson dipped his head in a quick, terse nod. "That it does. English, we'll be back around sundown. Hope the barn meets my inspection when we get back."

The suspicion that even if he had shown up with a mount, he would still be cleaning the barn registered with Jon. As the new hire,

he would find himself being given the jobs none of the other wranglers really wanted to do. "Yes, sir. It'll be cleaned."

"From the rafters down." Iverson strolled over to his horse and swung up. As the other men rode out, the foreman reined his horse around to Jon, and said, "There's fresh straw for bedding in the lean-to behind the barn. Other cleaning supplies are in the tack-room." He then put his heels into his horse.

By noon, Jon found himself wondering why he'd agreed to this. He'd already stripped out seven of the ten stalls, hadn't even had a chance to sweep the aisleway down the center of the barn, and the cobwebs and dust decorating the windows promised a long afternoon climbing up and down a ladder. He hadn't even brought anything for dinner, though the water from the pump at the trough was ice cold and did slake his thirst.

He picked up the pitchfork and set about throwing the soiled straw into the wheelbarrow he placed in the doorway of the stall.

"Jonathan, you need to take a little time for dinner." Deborah Hale stood next to the wheelbarrow.

He paused and raked a hand through his sweat-soaked hair. "I didn't bring dinner, and I really need to have this barn cleaned by sundown."

Deborah's chuckle sounded as light as the water gurgling down a small stream. "Is that what he has you doing?"

"Yes, ma'am." Jon carefully tossed another forkful of the straw into the wheelbarrow.

"Ma'am? We've known each other since I was in short skirts and pigtails. You used to pull my pigtails." Her smile grew brighter. "I was so jealous of Miss Victoria. She was married to the most handsome man in the whole county."

He was in dangerous territory here. Jon sucked in a deep breath. "That was before you grew up, and before you married Mr. Hale. I don't think either my wife or your husband would be appreciative of me tugging your hair, now." He forked up the last of the soiled bedding. "If you'll excuse me, Miss Deborah, I need to take this out."

Deborah stepped back. "Isaac isn't going to fire you for sitting down to dinner with me, Grandfather, and Grandmother."

Jon clutched the handles on the wheelbarrow more tightly as he backed it out of the doorway. "I'm not being paid to sit down to dinner, Miss Deborah. I appreciate the offer, but I have to decline."

When he returned to the barn, Deborah was gone. Jon heaved a deep sigh of relief. He didn't think the young woman had been flirting with him, just trying to rekindle what she believed to be an old friendship. Still, it had been uncomfortable.

He inwardly winced when the sound of Deborah's footfalls entered



the barn again a short while later.

“Jonathan, if you won’t come into the house, I brought your dinner to you.”

Jon twisted his head over his shoulder. Deborah walked down the aisle with a covered tray, carefully balancing it so the glass in the corner of the tray didn’t spill. Condensation already formed on the glass with the thick humidity of the day. She set the tray on one of the clean straw bales he brought into the barn earlier to bed the stalls with, then pulled the checkered fabric off the tray.

“You can take a few minutes to eat dinner. Isaac knows no matter how much work he assigns, Grandmother refuses to allow anyone to work through either dinner or supper.” She patted the straw bale. “So, put that pitchfork down, go wash up at the trough, and eat.”

“I may assume that is an order from your grandmother?” Jon put the pitchfork in the wheelbarrow.

“Yes.” Deborah grinned. “If you want to dispute it, you have to take it up with her.”

“No, ma’am. I would never engage in a dispute with Grandmother Jackson.” Jon knew as soon as he said it, he had made a mistake. While he washed his hands and wiped the sweat from his face, throat, and neck, he wondered just how to explain away the mistake if Deborah questioned him on it.

When he returned to the barn, the younger woman sat on a straw bale near his dinner, her brow furrowed. “You’ve changed, Jonathan.”

Jon turned his attention to the bowl of what appeared to be a hearty stew of some sort. His heart pounded so fiercely it echoed in his ears. He spooned up a portion of the stew, struggling to keep his composure. “How so?”

“You hated Isaac. Everyone in town knew it. Even I knew it.”

“War changes how a man thinks, Miss Deborah.” He gulped a spoonful of the still hot stew, hoping to dissuade her from much further inspection of how much he had changed. “How much did that war change your husband? He was a Sharpshooter for the Union, wasn’t he? How much did that change him? That war changed you, too. Instead of marrying some fine, upstandin’ Yankee, you settled for a man some might call a coward.”

Deborah reared back, and her face blanched. “How dare you? You don’t know how deeply being a Sharpshooter damaged Chance.”

Jon bit back the apology before it escaped him. Thank heavens, Victoria had filled him full of minute details about Deborah Brokken, her brothers, her father, and her grandparents over supper the night before. “So, it changed him, didn’t it? Miss Deborah, your foreman has been loyal to the Brokken family for as long I’ve known y’all. That kind of loyalty is rare. It took that war to make me realize it.” Jon

didn't mention the utter shock and disbelief he and many of his fellow Union soldiers felt when they saw colored men serving in the ranks of the Confederates. Those colored troops were often side by side with the men in grey, very unlike the few colored regiments of the North that were segregated. He set the spoon down. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go back to work. Thank you for bringing dinner out to me."

He made his way to the stall he had been cleaning when she had brought dinner out and busied himself with completing the stripping down of that small area. When he emerged from the stall a little while later, Deborah was gone.

By the time the sun started sinking below the horizon, Jon swept the last section of the aisle way. The windows glowed red-gold like burnished bronze in the fading light, every stall had fresh bedding, and even the rafters had been wiped clean of the thick gouts of dusty cobwebs. The bridles and saddles in the tack room were wiped down. The work-bench in the front corner had been cleaned off, the tools hung once more onto pegs on the wall. He took the broom to the tack-room, pausing to give the barn one last look. Each stall had a bale of straw outside to freshen the bedding in the morning. The buckets all had cool, fresh water. Nothing seemed out of place. If Iverson expected him to fail this task, he figured the foreman was going to be disappointed.

He hung the broom on the hook and heard several horses near the barn.

Iverson walked into the barn as Jon left the tack room. The foreman's head tilted back, his gaze skipping over the rafters, down to the clean windows, and then along the trail of straw bales outside the stalls. Without a word, he looked over to the work-bench, and then made his way past Jon to the tack-room. At last, the foreman said, "It'll do. If you're late tomorrow, don't bother to come out here."

Jon choked down his anger, reined in the sharp response he itched to hurl at the foreman for his "it'll do" assessment, and met Iverson's gaze. "I'll be on time."



VICTORIA SWUNG DOWN off her horse, squared her shoulders, and marched onto the front porch of the Brokken home. Before she could knock, Deborah pulled the heavy door open. "Sheriff, good morning."

"Hello, Deborah. Is Isaac here?"

"He's finishing up his coffee before we all head into town for church. Is something wrong?"

Victoria pulled her hat off. "It's a matter I would rather discuss with Isaac."

“All right.” Deborah stepped to a side. “Would you like to come in? I’ll get Isaac for you.”

Victoria walked into the foyer, the sound of her boot heels tapping on the slate flooring seemingly swallowed by the heavy woodwork.

Deborah gestured to the formal parlor to the right. “I’ll bring him into the parlor. Would you care for a cup of coffee?”

“No, thank you.” Victoria crossed the parlor and gazed out the tall window. Brand new posts and freshly milled fence boards gleamed bright in the early morning sunlight, waiting to be whitewashed. Since the men had started coming to Brokken, the work at the ranch hadn’t been neglected. Perhaps, having all the prospective grooms over the past twelve months stay at the Brokken Arrow until they either married or moved on hadn’t been fair to the rest of the town’s folk.

“Miss Deborah said you wanted to talk to me, Sheriff?”

Victoria craned her head over her shoulder. Deborah stood back, in the foyer, her face alight with undisguised curiosity. “Yes, Isaac, I do. Please close the doors first.”

The crestfallen expression crossing Deborah’s face would have been laughable if Victoria weren’t so angry. Isaac slid the pocket doors closed and the moment the solid wood pieces touched one another, Victoria rounded on her heel to the foreman. “Where is Jon...nathan?”

She silently cursed herself for the near slip.

“I put him to work repairing the fence along the river.”

Victoria well knew that section of fence. It started a good mile from the house and ran for nearly three miles along the Brokken River. “What are you trying to prove here, Isaac? For the last six days, my husband has been out of the house at least an hour before first light, and he isn’t back until hours after sunset. He comes home too tired to eat, and all he does is fall asleep on the chesterfield.” She wasn’t about to tell Isaac that was where she and Jon had agreed he would sleep. “It’s Sunday. He shouldn’t even be here, today.”

“Livestock still need tended to and looked after.”

“You have three hired hands who reside here and Mr. Hale to do that on Sunday. What is your point in this?”

Something shifted in the foreman’s expression. Victoria recognized it as admiration. “He’s stubborn, I’ll give him that,” Isaac said. “I want him to quit.”

“Why?” Victoria took a step closer. “If he wasn’t doing the work you’ve told him to do to your satisfaction, just fire him.”

“That’s the problem,” Isaac said, a smile crossing his face. “He’s done everything I’ve told him to, done it right, done it without having to have anyone standing over him, and done it without complaint.”

A paperweight shaped like a twisting fish on Franklin Brokken’s unused desk drew her attention, and she lifted the small brass

sculpture. "I'm confused. Why do you want him to quit if all of that is true?"

Iverson sighed, softly. "Sheriff...Miss Victoria...can we sit down and talk like friends, instead of the adversaries we seem to be at this moment?"

She placed the paperweight back where it had been on the desk and took a seat in one of the chairs near the window. The foreman sat across from her. He leaned closer, and then turned his head toward the pocket doors. "Deborah Brokken Hale, you get away from those doors, right now, or I will let your grandmother know you've taken to eavesdropping."

The scuffling of feet outside the room brought a smile to Victoria. Isaac murmured, "No matter how old she gets, some things never change." He then leaned even closer, propped his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands together. "Speaking of things that never change...that man isn't Jonathan."

Victoria's heart leaped into her throat and lodged there. "Are you telling me I don't know my own husband?"

"I'm telling you, even though I believe through Christ all men are made anew, no man can change as much as Jonathan English claims that war changed him. He isn't Jonathan English."

Victoria forced a calm to her voice she wasn't feeling. "And I think you've lost your mind."

Another smile brushed across the older man's features. "Perhaps I have. Let me explain to you why I want Jonathan, or whatever his name is, to quit. Before the war, Jonathan English wasn't fit to wear that badge you're wearing."

Victoria glanced at the badge pinned to her blouse.

"Jonathan used that badge for personal gain. He abused the power it gave him. He turned a blind eye to things he never should have and heavily-handed enforced the law on those who crossed him." Isaac's voice remained just above a low murmur, to avoid any possibility of being overheard.

All of that was true. When she pinned the badge on the first time, she promised herself she would be impartial and wouldn't use it as Jonathan had.

"This man you've claimed is your husband is the man who should be wearing that badge."

Victoria's head snapped up. Iverson raised a hand, forestalling her protest. "Since the afternoon he came here, hat in hand, apologizing for actions that weren't his, I've known he isn't Jonathan. I've done everything I can to push him to his breaking point. I've given him every single job on this ranch not a one of the wranglers will do without a month of complaining and threats of being fired if they

don't, made him work by himself, and he's done those jobs without a single complaint. Do you know how hard it is to completely strip out a hog shed in this heat?"

Victoria turned her gaze to the floor. "He doesn't want to be sheriff, again."

"Whether it's again or just doesn't want to be sheriff, that's all the more reason he needs to put that badge on." Iverson's large hand rounded on her shoulder. "Miss Victoria, I will do everything I can to make him quit and put that badge on."

"He won't quit." The intricate inlay of the wood floor held her gaze. "He won't."

"How do you know that?"

Without betraying him, there wasn't any way to tell Isaac how she knew Jon wouldn't quit. She minutely shook her head. "I just know. He won't quit."

"Who is he?"

Victoria lifted her head and forced herself to meet the older black man's intense but gentle gaze. She licked her lips, swallowed to bring some moisture to her dry mouth, and firmly said, "He's my husband."

"But, he's not Jonathan." Isaac's expression softened further.

"He's my husband," she repeated.



# Chapter Eleven

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Since she had left the Brokken Arrow that morning, Victoria fretted and stewed. Even the overstuffed chair she could usually find solace in didn't offer such now. The mantel clock softly chimed ten times. Victoria bolted out of the chair and paced the floor. This was the latest Jon had ever been at the Brokken Arrow. What if Isaac had confronted Jon with what he suspected? If Isaac confronted him, would Jon just cut and run?

As much as she tried to tell herself Jon wouldn't do that, she couldn't make her heart believe it. And if he did run, would she even mount up a serious pursuit, or would she let him go? That was easier to answer. If he ran, she wouldn't pursue him.

His slow steps, stumbling with what she knew had to be exhaustion, sounded on the back porch. Her relief overwhelmed her momentarily before she gathered herself and ran to the kitchen.

Jon stood at the sink, elbows braced on the countertop, bent nearly double. He held his head between his hands. His shirt and one sleeve hung in tatters and was bloodstained. The lantern light she kept pitched low anticipating his return made the stains appear rusty.

Her heart leaped into her throat. "Jon?"

He didn't move, other than to slowly rotate the heels of his hands against his temples. She recognized the attempt to relieve the pain of a headache, as she'd often done the same thing. Every breath rasped from him as if even that was an effort.

"Are you all right? What happened?" She managed a single step closer to him. Where the shirt wasn't ripped, it clung to his form with dried sweat.

"Just scratched up. About ten posts down from where I was stretching that new barbed wire, the wire snapped off the post and coiled back on me." His head bent closer to the sink. "I've never seen anything move that fast. I barely had time to throw my arm up."

"I'm going to get Mathew."

"I don't need a doctor." He shook his head and with an effort, partially straightened, though his elbows still propped him against the counter. "I just need to clean up, eat something, and get some sleep. At least, Iverson told me to take tomorrow off."

Something she said had reached Isaac. She would take that small

victory. Victoria closed the distance between them and curled her hand over his forearm. "Jon, you can't keep doing this."

He bent his head until his chin was on his chest. "Yes, I do. I need this bone-deep exhaustion, because without it, it's impossible to remember I'm not really your husband."

The deepened timbre of his voice found a response deep in Victoria. Her heart quickened, and the warmth filling her started in her belly and spread throughout her whole frame. She drew her hand up his arm. "Unless you or I say something, to everyone else, you are Jonathan."

Mentioning Isaac's assertions wasn't anything she planned to do, and she quelled the small voice reminding her this was a dangerous game they both played.

He slumped further. "Do you know how much I hate Jonathan? Hate him for everything he stood for? Mostly, I hate him for how he hurt you and no matter what I say or do, there will always be that small suspicion that I just don't look like him, but I could act like him."

Victoria slipped her hand along his cheek and turned his head to her. "Being suspicious is part of the job, but here, between you and me, you will never be Jonathan English. Given time, people will forget how he was and will just remember the changed man."

She trailed her hand down the side of his neck, startled when he caught her wrist and pushed her hand away from him.

"Don't, Vic." His voice rasped on his shortened breath. "I'm exhausted, not dead. And, we aren't married. I won't jeopardize your reputation if this ruse is found out."

"My reputation would be the least of our worries if this ruse is found out." She pressed her palm to his heart. The steady rhythm increased in tempo. His breath caught when she stood on tiptoe and pressed a kiss on his mouth.

He caught her upper arms and while he gently pushed her back, he also drew away from her. The silence between them grew so much Victoria was certain he could hear how fiercely her heart pounded.

"If you really want to continue this," he said, breaking the tableau, "let me get cleaned up."

Victoria nodded and then watched him walk into the small bathing room off the kitchen. She wrapped her arms around herself, debating the wisdom in her actions. Her mother would say she was jumping into it with both eyes shut. A snort broke from Victoria. Her mother would also tell her to follow her heart. *Which is it I should be doing, Mother?*

The door connecting her bedroom to the bathing room squeaked. All her bravado vanished, and she couldn't make her feet move



toward her room. She paced the floor, pausing to place the clean dishes in the cabinet. The counter required a wipe down. As she realized she was doing everything that came to mind just to avoid the bedroom, her gaze turned to the closed door.

*Stop being a ninny.* She pulled her hands down her side and then reached to the back of her head and removed the pins and combs holding her hair in its usual, loose chignon. A quick shake of her head and a run of her fingers through the lengths removed the last of the twist.

She crossed the floor and pushed the bedroom door open, halting in the doorway. Jon sprawled flat on his back, one foot on the floor, sound asleep. As she studied his sleeping form, she leaned her shoulder against the doorjamb. How had she ever mistaken him for Jonathan? Superficially, yes, he looked enough to pass as a twin. But that was where it ended.

Jon's shoulders weren't as broad, and he was taller by at least two inches. The blue of his eyes was darker and warmer. The partially closed front of his shirt drew her attention. Her cheeks heated as she noted the dark, curling wisps escaping the confines of the fabric.

A deeper breath lifted his chest. With a sigh, Victoria pushed off the doorjamb and crossed the room to the quilt rack in the corner. She pulled the quilt off the rack and then carefully draped it over Jon. He didn't even stir when she cautiously brushed the starburst pattern smooth over his chest.

For a long moment, she debated sliding into the bed next to him, and almost as quickly, negated that thought. He had slept for the past weeks on the chesterfield. She could manage to sleep in the parlor for one night. She lifted her holstered revolver off the nightstand and made her way to the parlor.



A LOUD BANGING ON THE front door woke Victoria from a restless sleep. No matter how she positioned herself on the overstuffed cushions, she hadn't been able to get comfortable.

The grey light of the approaching dawn lit the space. She stumbled across the room, cursing whoever was at the door. If that banging woke Jon, she'd have a few choice words to say.

Lavender Lilly stood in front of the door, clearly distraught, tears sliding down her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" Victoria dragged both hands through her hair, pulling the mess from her face. A quick twist and tuck tamed the lengths into a loose gathering at the base of her neck.

"They're missing." Lavender almost sobbed. "No one has seen

them. They never came home last night.”

The immediate concern coursing through her fully woke Victoria. “Who’s missing?”

Lavender twisted her hands around the other, a new sob breaking from her. “Scraps and Rags. They never came home last night. I know something terrible has happened to them.”

The two smallest dogs of Lavender’s assorted menagerie...Victoria barely contained an exasperated sigh. “I’m sure they’re fine. They probably got on the scent of something in the woods, wandered too far, and slept the night out there. Leave a bowl of their favorite food out and they’ll be back.”

“No.” Lavender shook her head, dislodging more tears to slide down her cheeks. “Something terrible has happened to them. I just know it.” She slapped her own chest, over her heart. “I feel it here. You’ve got to help me find them.”

“I’m—”

“Victoria, please.” Lavender grabbed her hands in a fierce grip. “Please help me find them.”

“Good morning, Miss Lavender.” Jon’s deep voice rumbled behind Victoria. The tone changed in an instant as he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“My babies are missing,” Lavender wailed. “I can’t find them anywhere.”

“I didn’t know you had—” He broke off, and then stepped around Victoria, closer to Lavender. “How long have they been gone, and do you remember what they were wearing? Is there any place they like to go we should look first?”

Victoria didn’t know if she should be angry with him for taking immediate charge or amused by his change in demeanor. This was a man who claimed he didn’t want the sheriff’s badge. Isaac was correct when he said Jon needed to be the sheriff. Before Lavender could answer Jon’s questions, Victoria said, “Her babies are her two littlest dogs, Rags and Scraps.”

“Oh.” Jon didn’t draw away from Lavender with that revelation. “We don’t need to be concerned about what they were wearing the last time you saw them. When did you see them last, Miss Lavender?”

“I let them out about nine last night.” Lavender turned her watery gaze to Jon. “I wasn’t worried when they didn’t come right back in, but when they weren’t home at midnight...” She trailed off, dashing tears away. “I’ve looked everywhere. I can’t find them.”

Jon offered his arm to Lavender. “Show me where Scraps and Rags like to run. Maybe they just followed a wonderful smell and got lost. We’ll find them.”

Lavender slipped her arm through Jon’s. “Thank you.”

Victoria shook her head, stamping down the sudden surge of

jealousy. The exact same thing she said to Lavender brought about calm when Jon said it. Was it because he was a man? She was the sheriff, wasn't she? Her sight turned again to Jon as he carefully guided Lavender around potential hazards to the hem of her skirt. They navigated toward Lavender's house and the woods on the west side of town.

The jealousy fired higher. It wasn't as if she had needed his assistance to cross the street and stepping in horse manure wasn't an issue in boots and trousers. If she donned a skirt, he'd show her the same courtesy he gave to Lavender. He was just being a gentleman.

While she dressed to go to the jail, Victoria continued to battle the jealousy raging in her. This was Jon, not Jonathan. She hadn't once seen him flirt with any woman. He seemed to reserve that behavior for her. *Jonathan kept his philandering a deep secret, or are you forgetting that, too?*

She dragged a brush through her hair, pulling it harder through a tangle at the base of her skull, welcoming the burning pinch of hair separating from her skin. Feel anything other than this jealousy and doubt. Anything, even if it reminded her of how much her scalp would hurt after Jonathan grabbed a fistful of her hair to prevent her escaping his fists.



A COMMOTION DREW VICTORIA to her feet and out the door of the jail. Jon led a screaming and distraught Lavender through the open area between the jail, the hotel, and the doctor's house. Lavender staggered more than she walked, her sobs heart-rending. Victoria ran across the dusty ground, her boot heels pounding as fiercely as her own heart.

"What happened?" Victoria asked as she fell in step with Jon and Lavender. Jon met her gaze, his eyes dark and troubled. Lavender seemed to crumble and only continued forward when Jon's arms tightened around her and drew her with him.

"They're dead. They're both dead." Lavender sobbed.

Jon nudged his head toward Knight's home forestalling any question Victoria wanted to ask. She tucked into Lavender's other side, adding her support to the hysterical woman.

Her loud wails drew Abigail and Mathew onto the front porch. Within a few minutes, she and Jon maneuvered Lavender into the front parlor and onto a small love seat. Abigail sat next to the distraught young woman, an arm around her shuddering shoulders, murmuring indistinct words of comfort.

Jon backed out of the room and said, "I'll be on the front porch."

Victoria gestured to Mathew, relieved when he joined her in the foyer. "Is she going to be all right?"

"Hysteria. Most times, I'd prescribe laudanum but lately, I defer to the calming abilities of my wife."

"Should Abby be doing this in her condition? She's almost two weeks past her due date, isn't she?" Victoria didn't know who held most of her concern—Abigail, Lavender, or Jon.

A grin tugged the doctor's mouth, and he leaned closer. "Do you really want to try to tell Abby she shouldn't be assisting me?" His amusement faded, and he asked, his voice little more than a whisper, "What happened?"

"I don't know. I'm going onto the porch to ask Jonathan."

Jon sat on the top step, his back to the door. He came to his feet when Victoria and Mathew emerged from the home. His gaze skipped from Mathew to her. "I told Miss Lavender I'd go back and bury her little dogs."

"Was it the cougar?" Victoria asked, though she already knew the answer. A thread of unease tugged at the base of her spine, tracing chilling fingers up her back.

Jon shook his head. "I don't think so." He turned away, his head bent, shoulders slumped. "Doc, I know this isn't your area of expertise, but will you come with me when I go back to bury those two and let me know for sure if it was a cougar kill."

"If it was a cougar kill, there shouldn't be much left," Mathew said.

"They're all there, mostly."

The chill deepened over Victoria. "Mostly?"

Again, Jon nodded. "The buzzards and crows were already on them. I had to get her away from that, so I couldn't do much of anything to protect what was left."

Bile rose in the back of Victoria's throat. Her heart wrenched for the pain such a sight must have caused Lavender. "Where did you find them?"

"Along Blueberry Creek, about an eighth of a mile north from the west bridge."

Mathew took a step back. "I'll go check on how Abigail is progressing with calming Miss Lilly, and then I'll get the spade out of the shed. I'll meet you there."

Victoria waited until Mathew was out of earshot before she said, "I'm coming with you."

"No."

The harshness and curtness took her back. "I'm the sheriff. If this isn't a cougar doing all of—"

"No." Jon's voice broke on the word. He audibly swallowed and took a step closer, his voice dropping. "You don't want to see this. I'll

tell you anything you want to know. Talk to Mathew when we get back. Trust me when I tell you that you never want to see anything like this.”

Victoria pulled her sight from his troubled expression and scanned the heavy pine and live oak woods that surrounded the town. The sheltering protection of the thick woods seemed more of a threat, as if every move she made was being watched, weighed, and measured, looking for a weakness. She dropped her hand onto the grip of her revolver and thumbed the leather loop off the hammer. “Take this with you.”

“No.” He shook his head, slowly. “You keep it and you keep it close.”

The implicit warning in his words clenched her heart. “The key to the rifle rack is in the center drawer of the desk. Stop at the jail and take a carbine with you.”

“I’ll do that.”

Victoria flung her arms around him. Jon levered back without breaking her embrace and caught her face between his hands. He brushed a slow kiss across her forehead, and then said, “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Be careful.”



## Chapter Twelve

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“Y ou’re certain it wasn’t a big cat?” Jon scanned the dark woods, every nerve on edge. The silence in the copse of trees only added to the tension humming through him.

“Positive.” Knight stood, brushing humus, crumbling leaves, and dirt from his knees. “This was done with surgical precision.”

A twig snapping in the thick stand of live oak and pine made both men turn. Jon brought the carbine up at the same time. The sound didn’t repeat. The oppressive silence deepened and held until Knight picked up the spade. “You keep watch. I’ll bury them.”

“I’ll bury them. I promised Miss Lavender I would.” Jon pulled his gaze from the thick woods.

“I can’t shoot a rifle,” Knight pointed out, raising his left hand. “As long as they’re buried, that’s what she would want.”

Jon nodded. Knight wouldn’t be the prudent choice for manning the carbine. He scanned the woods, leading his survey with the muzzle of the rifle. His gaze didn’t linger on any one spot too long, knowing if he did, the shadows would begin to play tricks on his sight, making him see things that weren’t there.

The horses snorted and shuffled uneasily. An almost inaudible rustle of fallen leaves from somewhere behind him lifted the hair on the back of Jon’s neck. He slowly pivoted, trying to keep from peering too intently into the dark shadows and letting his sight recognize the few, tiny dapples of sunlight penetrating the copse. A single glint that didn’t belong shoved his heart into his throat.

“Doc, are you done?” he asked, even as he jacked a round home and sighted the rifle into the dense growth.

“Done enough.” Knight tamped a last shovelful of dirt down on the small grave.

“We need to get out of here.” Jon held the rifle steady, his finger curled around the trigger. That glint continued from what he suspected was the unblinking stare of the cougar.

Knight untied his horse and swung up, shifting the spade to his left hand. He reached behind himself, under the tail of his frock coat, and withdrew a heavy revolver. “I’ll cover you.”

Jon let a mirthless smile cross his face. “I thought you said you couldn’t shoot.”

“I said I couldn’t shoot a rifle.” The doctor directed his weapon in the general direction Jon had the carbine aimed. “I don’t need both hands to hold a revolver steady enough to fire it.”

Once they were in the open, Jon let his guard down, and Knight tucked the revolver away. Jon reined his horse to a stop. “If Miss Lavender asks, it was a cougar kill. Victoria needs to hear the truth.”

“No.” Knight brought his horse to a stop next to him. “People need to know the truth. The more people know, the sooner we can catch whoever is doing this.”

Jon studied the frayed stitching on the top of the saddle horn. “You’re right. What makes a person do that?”

“I don’t know.” Knight’s shoulders rose with the deep breath he sucked in. “I thought, during that war, I’d seen the lowest depths of barbarity.”

Jon shut his eyes. He’d been involved in some of the fiercest fighting in that war, been engaged in hand to hand combat when his life depended on his willingness to look a man in the eye while killing him, saw the effect of what exploding cannon balls and grape shot did to men and horses, but nothing had prepared him for the sight of those little dogs.

“Jonathan, I don’t want Lavender to be more upset than she is, but this could have just as easily been a child. It could have been Abe or Ethan.” The doctor’s voice broke on his son’s name. “They play in that creek and in those woods.”

A chill rippled over Jon. “You think if it had been a couple of little kids instead of those dogs, whoever did this would have done that to them?”

“I hope not.” The uncertainty in Knight’s voice forced Jon’s eyes open. “I’m not going to take a chance, though. That’s why the town needs to know, so they can keep their kids close.”

Without another word, Jon put his heels into his horse, starting the animal forward. Every dull thud of the animal’s hooves into the ground sounded as final as a judge’s gavel meting out a death sentence. He couldn’t dislodge the huge lump in his throat threatening to choke him, and he couldn’t shake the chill that settled deep in his bones. He had fallen asleep in the saddle last night on his way home from the Brokken Arrow. Only when the pounding of his mount’s hooves on the west bridge jolted him to awareness did he realize he had directed the horse out of town.

Could a man be so sound asleep that he didn’t remember deviating from a routine path home? Jon shook his head. He couldn’t have harmed those pets of Miss Lavender’s. He just couldn’t have. That kind of sheer, vicious, brutality went against everything he believed in.





VICTORIA COULDN'T STIFLE the sigh of relief that broke from her when Jon walked into the jail, carbine in hand. He glanced at her and Isaac, then dropped his gaze to the floor and without a word, fit the rifle into position in the rack.

Isaac met Victoria's gaze over the desk, his shaggy brows lifting in a silent query.

Jon poured himself a cup of coffee, and without lightening or sweetening it, gulped the cold brew down. He kept his back to her and the Brokken Arrow foreman.

Something happened while he was with Mathew. She had no idea what, but something had affected him deeply.

"I've got about fifteen head of cattle to move over to Shreveport," Isaac said. "When you come out to the ranch in the morning, have a bedroll with you."

Jon's head dropped. "I'm not going this time, Mr. Iverson. I don't think now is a good time to leave town."

If Isaac's brows had lifted before, they were almost buried in his hairline with Jon's announcement. "You quitting the Brokken Arrow?"

"Only if you're firing me for this." Jon finally pivoted to Victoria. The depths of his eyes were haunted, his expression taut and drawn. "You may as well hear this now, while I tell Vic."

Whatever he was about to say couldn't be good. A cold knot of dread filled her stomach and spread into her limbs.

"Someone..." Jon audibly swallowed and directed his next words to the floor. "Someone killed Miss Lavender's little dogs."

Victoria's lungs seized. Every instinct she had shouted for her to get up, go to Jon, and try to offer comfort. She just couldn't force herself to move, couldn't even force another breath. "Like Landry's dog the other day?"

Jon didn't or couldn't look at her as he nodded. The room spun around Victoria, a roaring filled her ears, and the bile rose into the back of her throat. The worst crimes she had ever dealt with committed by a citizen of Brokken had been drunk and disorderly. An ugly whisper of suspicion slithered through her. Until Jon's arrival, that was...

"Dear Lord," Isaac murmured, silencing her suspicion. "Perhaps some misguided youth is doing this?"

Jon's head snapped up. The haunted shading to his eyes vanished, replaced with a granite hardness. "You really think any kid in this town could be capable of this? Because I sure don't."

"The youth becomes the man," Isaac said quietly. "An adult, then?"

“Possibly...” Jon turned to fully face Isaac, a frown marring his features. “It takes a special kind of depravity to butcher a helpless animal in that manner.”

“Rather like it takes a special depravity to own another man?” Isaac’s voice was level, his eyes watchful.

Jon’s jaw clenched even as he pulled back. Victoria shot out of her chair, stepping between the two men. “Jon...athan, I don’t think Isaac meant to infer someone in Brokken....” She trailed off. She had to keep up the charade of Jonathan’s support of slavery but didn’t quite know how. Even if Isaac believed Jonathan had changed, no man could change that much. Victoria placed her hand, palm flat on Jon’s chest, silencing him. She kept her hand pressed into his chest and twisted her head over her shoulder to Isaac. “There’s no need to refight the same war.”

A strained tableau filled the small jailhouse as both men glared at the other. Jon’s act, if that was what it was, almost convinced her of his dislike of Isaac. His rigid posture eased, and he said, “Slavery and all the evils attached to it was a barbaric practice.”

“I wasn’t thinking any child or even anyone in Brokken could be responsible for what’s happening.” Isaac added, “I don’t even think old man Fenton’s son is capable of doing what you said happened to Miss Lavender’s dogs.”

“Thank you,” Victoria said, on little more than a breath. She pulled her hand from Jon, missing the warmth that radiated from her palm all the way in her chest as soon as she did. “We cannot fight amongst ourselves. Word of this is going to cause a panic. People are going to be demanding answers. Isaac, I need Jonathan here.”

Panic was a mild word for what she expected the response to be. No one, as far as she knew and for as long as she could remember, locked their doors in Brokken. If there was some deranged madman lurking in their midst, locked doors would only be the beginning of the alarm.

Isaac walked over to the coffee pot and poured a cup of coffee. He took a sip and grimaced. “How did you manage to stomach this, English?” Before Jon answered, Isaac continued. “If you’re not riding with me to Shreveport and your wife says she needs you here, are you going to pin that badge on again?”

“No.” Jon made his way to the windows at the front of the jailhouse. “I don’t want it.”

Victoria startled to hear Isaac repeat what he said to her the other day.

“That you don’t want it is all the more reason you need to pin it on.” Isaac took a step closer to Jon. “English, folks are going to be scared, wondering if the next killing will be worse than two

pampered, overweight dogs. They're going to want a strong, calm presence behind that badge." He tilted his head toward Victoria. "Not that we don't already have that. However, with the two of you working together, I feel you'd make a stronger team."

Jon didn't take his gaze from whatever held his attention out the window. Victoria doubted there was anything he truly looked at.

Jon sighed. "That's why Vic needs to keep that badge. Like you said, she's been a strong and calm presence since she first took over the position."

"Then, allow her to continue. You don't need to be here." Isaac shot a demanding glance at Victoria. "We'll be gone at the most three days. It's a small herd I need to move to Shreveport. Mr. Hale doesn't do well in crowded places."

Almost in an undertone, without anything she could even term derision, Jon said, "I'll bet he doesn't." His head pulled back, his shoulders tensed, and his spine grew rigid. "Doc must have told someone else. There's four people heading this way, and they look pretty determined."

"Isaac, I want Jonathan here." Victoria joined Jon at the window. Sophia, Molly and her husband Thomas, and the blacksmith Peter advanced on the jail.

"I'll make this simple, Sheriff. If your husband doesn't show up at the Brokken Arrow tomorrow morning at first light with a bedroll tied behind his saddle, I'll no longer be needing his services." Isaac's voice took on an unaccustomed edge, a forcefulness. "I can't have a wrangler on the payroll who doesn't want to work. Are you going to do the job I hired you to do, English, or are you going to do the job God intended for you to do?"

Jon met Victoria's gaze, and she gulped. A blue norther howling across the skies was warmer than the ice filling Jon's eyes or brimming in his voice as he said, "I don't think God has a thing to do with this, *Mr. Iverson*."

"Being someone you aren't is a tough business, and you'll soon be found out. Be at the Brokken Arrow at first light or pin that badge on."

Victoria sucked in a breath, holding it. Jon clenched his jaw and turned to look out the window at the approaching foursome, and then asked, "Is that some sort of threat?"

She spared a quick glance out the window. Peter reached the boardwalk first, still a distance away.

Isaac said, his words soft, "All three of us in this building know you aren't Jonathan English."

"Two of us are willing to swear I am Jonathan English." The tension in Jon's posture radiated into Victoria, tightening in her chest

and knotting her stomach. Jon slowly craned his head over his shoulder to Isaac. "All I have to do is point out your claims otherwise are just another difficult trick taught to a well-trained dog to convince folks I am Jonathan English."

Victoria flinched as Jon spat the words Jonathan had once used regarding Isaac. The challenge hung in the air.

Isaac's half-smile held neither anger nor disappointment. However, his eyes saddened. "Perhaps leave a few bruises on your wife for good measure? No, I don't believe you are capable of that type of behavior. You are not Jonathan English, and anyone with eyes to see will know that, if they don't already."

Victoria was stricken. Isaac had known of Jonathan's abuse, perhaps had confronted her husband. It was not merely the man's blackness that Jonathan had hated but perhaps his perceptive eyes. And Isaac could do nothing as long as Jonathan had remained sheriff.

The Brokken Arrow foreman threw her a glance, his eyes radiating warmth, and gave her a gentle smile as he walked to the door. Before it closed, Isaac's greeting to the foursome drifted back into the jail.

Jon's whole frame slumped. "Trying to think like him, and how he'd use words as weapons makes me ill. I can't do this, Vic."

Only moments remained before the entourage reached the jail. Victoria ran her hand down his arm. "We don't have a choice. I...Jon, I...I—"

"Tell everyone I fooled even you." The bitterness in his voice burned as caustic as acid.

Victoria pushed her way between him and the window, forcing Jon to meet her gaze again. "I don't care what anyone will say about me. I care what will happen to you."

"Why, Vic?"

She raised her hand to his face, drawing her palm along his cheek. "Because I've fallen in love with you, Jon Andrews."

"No, you haven't." He pushed away from her, backing away, as if he couldn't bear her touch. "You've fallen in love with a romanticized ideal of what you wanted your husband to be."



# Chapter Thirteen

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Victoria slowly lowered her hand, her heart aching. Anger rushed in to fill the ache. “Don’t you dare tell me what I’m feeling. You have no idea what he was like and how very different you are from him.”

“Don’t I?” Jon waved an expansive hand. “He terrified you. He intimidated you and most of the people in this town. But, at one time, he hid that side enough that you married him. Now, I’m here and I look enough like him you can have the husband everyone thought you had without the pain he caused.”

Before she could frame a response, the door to the jail opened and Peter and the other three marched into the small building. Thomas Reed spoke first. “Sheriff, is what Dr. Knight said true?”

Victoria huffed out a short breath and forced herself to a calm she didn’t feel. “What did Mathew say?”

She followed Jon’s measured tread to the small stove and watched as he poured another cup of the cold brew.

“Someone killed Lavender’s little dogs and we should be more watchful with our children,” Molly said, the words tight with concern.

Victoria dipped her head to the floor, struggling to keep a frustrated scream contained. What she wanted to do was tell them to stop expecting her to protect the whole town—she was only one person—and to get out so she could salvage what might be left of her heart. She sucked in a deep, steadying breath. “Someone is killing dogs and yes, you should be more watchful of your children. I’d suggest that you not allow them to play along Blueberry Creek until we find whoever is doing this.”

Sophia broke the pained silence. She pointed a trembling finger at Jon. “Nothing like this has ever happened here until he came back.”

Jon didn’t turn to face the accusation. With extreme deliberation, he drank whatever was left of his coffee, and then placed the ceramic cup on the small shelf next to the stove. “Why would I hurt Miss Lavender’s dogs?”

Sophia’s bravado vanished with Jon’s question. Victoria pulled the door of the jail open. “Accusing our friends and neighbors of this won’t solve anything. When Lavender’s dogs died, Jonathan was with me. All of you, go home.”

Peter shook his head, refusing to leave. “Victoria, we need

answers. Where did he—”

“I have none.” Victoria met the blacksmith’s demanding stare. “No more than I had for you the night he came back. I promised everyone in this town that I would use my best judgement as long as I was the sheriff. If that isn’t good enough for you anymore, maybe you should find someone else to be your sheriff.”

The blacksmith’s gaze shifted briefly to Jon’s back before he returned his sight to Victoria. “Are you sure your judgement isn’t clouded?”

A new anger filled Victoria. In sparse movements, she unpinned the badge from her blouse and extended the silver star to Peter. “If you think it is, you wear this.”

Thomas took a step closer to her and the unyielding blacksmith. “Peter, you knew Jonathan before the war. Even you said he’s changed.”

Movement at the stove caught in the corner of Victoria’s eye. Jon stood with his head bowed, shoulders slumped. Molly’s husband continued, “You knew Victoria then, too. You tell us if you really think her judgement is clouded.”

Peter’s rigid posture eased as he slowly shook his head. He glanced at the star Victoria still held out to him. “I don’t want that. I don’t want that responsibility.”

“I never wanted it, to be completely honest,” Victoria said and pulled her hand into herself, her fingers closing around the badge. “But, as long as I have the responsibility to protect this town, I take it seriously. I’m not going to start making accusations based on coincidental events. Now, go home. All of you.”

When the small group filed out of the jail, Victoria eased the door closed behind them, and then threw the lock into place. She squared her shoulders before she turned away from the locked door. Jon remained with his back to her, his attention seeming to be held by the depths of the cell closest to him.

The sound of the badge dropping onto her desk didn’t evoke any response from him. She stared at the small tin star, recounting all the mornings she had reluctantly pinned it to her blouse, and later, how hard she fought to retain the right to wear it.

The silence grew, until it felt as if it was a living entity standing between her and Jon. Not even the normal sounds of a busy morning intruded. Victoria felt for certain her heart shattered when he finally moved away from the small stove and walked closer to the open cell. He gripped the bars to either side of the door, as if he fought against being pushed into the enclosure.

“Why didn’t you tell them the truth?” he asked.

“What truth is that?” She swallowed the searing lump in her

throat. "The truth that I never loved Jonathan English as I—"

"Just stop, Victoria." He gripped the bars so fiercely his knuckles grew white. He lowered his head. "This ruse is going to fall apart. Iverson already suspects...he *knows* I'm not your husband."

She couldn't bring herself to deny what Isaac suspected. Neither could she deny what her heart saw—not Jonathan, but a man who looked enough like Jonathan it was uncanny and a man as unlike Jonathan as the dawn was from midnight; a man being crushed by the burden of being someone he wasn't. "As long as you're not Jon Andrews, you're free."

His posture stiffened, and he slowly relinquished his grip on the metal bars. He pivoted in a deliberate manner to her. Her breath caught in the back of her throat with the pain ravaging his features. "As long as I'm Jonathan English, I'm held as much a prisoner as if I was still at Watonga."

"If we tell people who you really are, I may as well start planning your funeral." Victoria took one step closer to him. "I can't do that. No more than I could bring myself to pray he was alive when he went missing after Tullahoma. I wanted to love him. I truly did."

His eyes slid shut for a long moment. "I don't want you to be in love with a perfected version of him."

She lifted her gaze to his face, certain the distance between them was a mile-wide chasm. "I'm not in love with any version of him." She managed one step closer, attempting to bridge the yawning chasm. "I never loved him as I am certain I love you."

His breath audibly caught. He took one hesitant step closer to her and held his hand out.

Victoria flew across the distance, flinging her arms around his neck, letting herself melt against him and into his embrace. A rattle of the doorknob followed with a rapid pounding against the wood forced them apart.

Jon lowered his arms with a short breath. Victoria turned from him and went to the door. Mathew stood with Ethan at his side.

She didn't have the door fully opened before Mathew blurted out, "Can you keep Ethan for a little while? Abby's in labor."

Victoria looked from Ethan to his very rattled father. In the year she had known him, she had never seen Mathew this disconcerted. "Is everything all right?"

Mathew nodded. "Seems to be. I'd feel better if there was another midwife. I've never delivered my own child before."

Add Abigail to her concerns. Victoria caught Mathew's lower arm under her hand and said, hoping to convey a lack of worry to the man, "Abby delivered every baby in this town when Sam was alive. Between the two of you, it will be fine."



Jon's footsteps sounded behind her. He dropped to one knee in front of Ethan. "You're going to be a big brother pretty soon, aren't you?"

Ethan vigorously nodded. "Momma's having a baby."

Jon lifted his head to Mathew but didn't come to his feet. "Shouldn't you be getting back to your wife?"

The doctor dragged a hand through his hair, further disheveling his appearance. "You won't let him out of your sight?"

That simple question drove an icy shaft into Victoria's heart. Mathew's over-protectiveness of Ethan had lessened in the previous months, eased by the peace and security Abigail offered. To hear Mathew's fear for Ethan's well-being reassert itself after he had helped to bury Lavender's little dogs confirmed how concerning this new threat in Brokken was.

Jon rose. "You have my word. Victoria, why don't you go with Mathew, in case he needs some help?"



THE BACK DOOR CREAKED and a moment later, Jon heard the latch catch. He slipped off the chesterfield and made his way through the dark and silent house into the kitchen. It had been well after midnight that he finally got Ethan to settle down enough to fall asleep in Victoria's large bed. For the first time in his life, he thanked heavens he had grown up with several much younger siblings.

Victoria sat at the table, nursing a cup of what he knew to be old coffee.

"I could start a new pot," he offered, and reached over the table for the lantern and lit it, trimming the wick until only the barest of illumination splashed onto the table. Her badge caught the feeble flame, shining and shimmering on the table, directly in front of her.

Victoria shook her head. "I'm not really drinking it. It's habit, holding a cup at the table. Where's Ethan?"

"Asleep in your bed, finally." Jon lifted a chair to move it away from the table, not wanting the scrape the legs on the floor and risk waking Ethan. "Everything okay with doc and his wife?"

"Abby's tired but she's fine. Mathew's...he's a little stunned, I think, is the best word for it. She had twins."

Jon sank into the chair. "Twins? That'll keep them busy. They name them yet?"

"Josephine Elisabeth and Ezra Samuel." She bent her head with a deep sigh. "I never realized how tiny newborn babies are."

"Ethan has the little brother he said he wanted." Jon leaned his elbows onto the table. "I've got to head out to the Brokken Arrow in a

little while.”

“You’re going with Isaac?” She still stared into the cup she clutched between her hands. He wasn’t sure because of the dim light but he thought he saw her shoulders tremble.

“Unless you’re willing to give up that badge, I don’t think I have a choice.”

She stilled as if she were carved of marble.

He eased out a long breath. “That’s what I thought.” The badge drew his attention, and he picked it up, to turn it over and over in his hands. “Vic, I meant it when I said I don’t want it. The little I’ve learned about how he used that tin star makes me even more determined to never add that to my portrayal of him.”

“Isaac’s right,” she whispered. With as much care as if the cup were crafted of spun glass, Victoria set the mug on the table. She lifted her head. The luminosity in her eyes took him aback when he realized the brightness was unshed tears. She added, “As much as you don’t want to wear that star is all the more reason you need to be the one people call ‘sheriff’ in this town.”

“And what will you do? Somehow, I don’t think that transition would be easy for you.” The low-pitched lamp flickered as a breeze found its way into the house through the open windows. Approaching rain heavily scented the air. Jon set the badge on the table again, once more in front of Victoria.

A watery smile splashed across her features. “I can go back to being Mrs. English.”

“I don’t like that, either.” Jon thought about pushing away from the table. Instead, he leaned closer to her, and caught her hands into his. “I’d much prefer you be Mrs. Andrews. However, as long as I’m a wanted, escaped convict, that—”

“What if we could clear your name?” Her fingers tightened on his and the tremulous smile strengthened. “What if we could prove you didn’t do anything you were accused of?”

“If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.” He extracted his hands from hers and stood. “I’ve got to grab my bedroll off the back porch and get out to the Brokken Arrow.”

“Don’t go. Please, don’t.” Victoria shoved herself to her feet and wrapped him in her arms. “Please.”

“I don’t like being blackmailed. He didn’t leave me a lot of options, Vic.” Jon knew he should be pushing her away and didn’t have the fortitude. He gathered her closer to him, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“Then, call his bluff. Don’t go. You don’t have to take on the responsibilities of being the sheriff, either.”

“What if we both call his bluff?” Jon struggled to ignore how her

warm breath feathered across his throat or how that warmth settled deep in his core. “Make me your deputy. You have the trust and confidence of the town’s people. I don’t have that. Being your deputy, we can work on reforming *my* reputation.”

She lowered her head to his chest, her arms tightening around his waist. “Can you take orders from a woman?”

“Enough people were shocked that I could take orders from Isaac.” A laugh welled in him. “Taking orders from you will be easy.”

She nuzzled in closer to him, her breath again light along his skin. “I have an order I’d like to give you, but unfortunately, our bed is occupied.”

He couldn’t quell the shiver that skipped over him when she brushed her lips against his collar bone. “Sheriff, are you suggesting you’d order me to perform an act reserved for the marriage bed? May I remind you, we aren’t truly married.”

The breeze flickered the lantern flame again, the scent of rain more pronounced. “Only you and I know that, Mr. Andrews, and I have no intention of revealing our secret.” She pulled her head off his chest and looked up at him. Sudden sadness darkened her already dark eyes. “You must think I’m a loose woman with even looser morals.”

“No, I don’t.” Jon slipped one arm off her waist. He drew his fingertips along the slope of her cheek. “I think you’ve found enough courage to risk being as vulnerable as you can ever be with someone you can trust. I don’t believe that makes you a woman of loose morals.”

An intermittent pattering whispered through the open window while the clean scent of the newly arrived rain filled the room.



# Chapter Fourteen

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When Jon didn't arrive at the Brokken Arrow as ordered, Isaac sent Calvin with a message that his employment was terminated and to not expect to be recommended for employment at any ranch in the area. Jon's response was he'd never been terminated from a position before. He then fell into the role as her deputy with a relaxed ease that made her question if he'd worn a badge previously.

He was more relaxed than she'd ever see him. That relaxation brought another wrinkle into the whole landscape, though. He was in an incorrigible flirt. His flirtations often distracted her from the serious nature of her job and the grim reality there was still a deranged individual in her town killing helpless animals. The latest had been Sally Jane's fluffball of a kitten. Jon defused Chance Hale's towering rage by promising the former sharpshooter five minutes alone with the perpetrator when—not if—when he was apprehended.

Victoria looked out the window of the jail with a sigh. What started as a soft, gentle soaking rain grew into a steady, continual downpour that so far had lasted three days. The streets of Brokken were fetlock deep in mud and anyone crossing the quagmire took life and limb into their own hands. The metallic rapping from the blacksmith shop continued almost nonstop, as Peter's business boomed replacing shoes sucked off hooves in the thick, clinging mud.

Jon pushed the door open, pausing only long enough to pull his hat from his head and let the pooling water on the bill drain onto the boardwalk behind him. He sluiced water off his long, oiled duster before he withdrew the weekly packet from inside the coat. He dropped the large envelope onto the desk. "Curt said to tell you that dress is still in his front window."

Heat filled Victoria's face. How often in the last few weeks had she thought about that dress? Or what Jon might say if she did purchase it and wear it for him? She pulled the packet closer to her, hoping to hide the color she knew stained her cheeks.

"You're blushing." Amusement warmed and deepened his voice. "I glanced at it. It would look very nice on you."

"Oh, and you know all about ladies' fashion, now?" She withdrew the contents from the large envelope and began to leaf through the assorted posters and notices.

“No, though I did get an education from Miss Deborah on why that dress is perfect for you. I also know pretty, and that dress was designed to be worn by a woman as beautiful as you.” Jon hung his hat and duster on the coat tree, the soft patter of water dripping from the duster’s lengths onto the floor filling Victoria’s hearing. A gurgle of coffee filling a cup reached her. She glanced over at him, wondering how she had ever mistaken him for Jonathan.

“You should buy it.” Jon grinned at her over the rim of the cup. “Really startle everyone in this town.”

“Why don’t you just say what you really want to—that you want to see me in that frippery and frou-frou.” Victoria looked away, unable to maintain her air of disapproval in the face of his amusement, the warmth simmering in his gaze, or even the suggestive lift of his brows.

She was much too aware of his presence when he propped a hip against her desk and leaned closer to her. “What man wouldn’t want to see his wife dressed in such finery?”

“As you are so often pointing out, we’re not really married. You’re still sleeping on the chesterfield.” Victoria flipped another poster over. Another wanted poster for those James boys. Again, she wondered if the US Marshal’s office knew just how far Brokken was from Missouri. She scanned a notice. The more she read, the more difficult breathing became, and it felt as if ice filled her veins. The print on the heavy paper swam and she shook her head, hoping to alleviate the light-headedness threatening to pitch her face-forward onto her desk.

“What’s wrong?” Jon’s teasing tone disappeared.

She handed him the notice. He scanned it, the color draining from his face. Wordless, he shook his head.

New charges had been filed against the escaped convict, Jon Andrews. A substantial reward was now offered and being paid for his return—dead or alive—all in connection with the murder of a homesteader’s wife a few hours south of Watonga. According to the notice, the night after Jon’s escape, a homesteader described a tall, dark-headed man who had stolen a horse. He pursued the thief but lost the trail. A few hours later, the horse was found, grazing. When the homesteader returned to his isolated home, his wife had been brutally butchered, according to the notice, and another horse was missing.

“It wasn’t me,” Jon whispered. He raised his gaze to her, levelly meeting her eyes. “I swear by all that’s holy, it wasn’t me. I never doubled back to any of the homesteads I came across.”

“I’m not the only sheriff or marshal who gets these packets. Adding a reward will have every bounty hunter in the state looking for you.” Victoria swallowed the icy lump in her throat. Before, the search might not have been intense. Prisoners escaped often, and sooner or

later, were recaptured because the escapees couldn't seem to stay out of trouble. It was an accepted reality. But, for an escaped prisoner to kill a woman, that would bring, to quote one lawman she knew, "hell raining down."

"You think it was me." It wasn't a question. He staggered a step away, the hunted and desperate light she had seen in his eyes those first few days burning across his expression again.

"No." Victoria shot to her feet, throwing her arms around him before he could further his retreat. "No. I don't believe for one second it was you."

He pushed her away, desperation darkening his eyes. "It couldn't have been me."

"Jon, I believe you." She held her hands out to him. "We'll resolve this, somehow. Somehow, we'll prove it wasn't you."

"How?" Desperation tightened his voice. "I can't even remember most of what I did or where..." He trailed off, staggering another step away. His whole posture sagged, as if he was crumbling under a crippling weight. "Oh, God...Vic, other than when the dog caught up to me and that first night trying to break the chains and taking that first horse, I can't remember everything. It's just bits and pieces."

"You remembered you took three different horses. You remembered back tracking a couple of times." She hoped she could jog his memory.

He nodded. "I never backtracked to the homesteads where I took the horses. I'm fairly certain of that." He drew a deep, shuddering breath. When he spoke again, defeat layered every word. "Who else could it have been?"

"Not you." Victoria caught his hands into hers. "I don't believe it was you."



THE RAIN CONTINUED to fall as Jon made his way through the darkened, slumbering town. His clothes wicked in the damp, clinging to him as cloying as a shroud. His head pounded. Each step he took throbbed through his skull with a sharper intensity.

How he got from the house to the small tributary of the Lighter Knot River had him confused. Jon stumbled as he crossed the train tracks, drawn to the light and the loud, bawdy music spilling out of the saloon. He halted before he stepped onto the boardwalk at the entrance. He'd never set foot in a saloon in his life. The pull to enter the establishment was almost overwhelming, even though the noise and light increased the pain piercing his head to nauseating levels.

Fighting the desire to walk through those doors, Jon turned away,

a flaring lantern burning in a window of the telegrapher's office catching his attention. For a moment, he wondered who would be sending out a telegram at such a late hour. He walked away as quickly as he could, breaking into a jog when he re-crossed the tracks. A single light shone through a window on the first floor of Knight's house. Jon skidded to a halt in the mud, staring at that light.

He gulped down the thick knot in his throat before he approached the house. At the door, he hesitated, and then knocked. When he thought no one was awake to answer, he turned to leave.

The door opened, and Knight stood silhouetted in the light. A sleeping infant was cradled to his chest. "Jonathan? Is something wrong?"

A low, far distant rumble of thunder growled across the heavens. Jon stared at the baby Knight held.

"You're soaked," Knight said, moving to one side. "Come on in."

Jon backed a step, shaking his head. "I don't even know why I'm here, Doc."

Knight's brow knit, even as he gestured for Jon to come into the house. "Why don't you come in, then? I would appreciate the company."

Jon still hesitated. "I don't want to bother you. You appear to have your hands full."

"It's no bother. If I put Miss Josephine down, she starts screaming." Knight gestured again for Jon to enter, and then led the way to the parlor. "It's my turn to hold her so everyone else can get some sleep."

The only time he had been in the parlor had been the morning Knight helped him bury Lavender's dogs, and his concern then had been for Lavender, not the décor. Jon did his best not to stare. Jonathan would have seen the interior of this house at least once, he assumed. The parlor was unlike any he'd ever seen. The room possessed a curving teak bar, the curve a graceful, sweeping "s" shape. Behind the bar, a mirror covered the wall from corner to corner and floor to ceiling. Red velvet flocked wallpaper patterned with gold-foil fleur-di-lis covered two of the three remaining walls. The last wall was dominated by a massive fireplace constructed of what Jon thought to be slate and granite, the fireplace itself flanked with built in bookshelves. The grandfather clock in a corner of the room quietly tolled the midnight hour.

Midnight? He'd bid Victoria a good night about nine. If he had been wandering the streets for a few hours, why couldn't he remember?

Knight shifted the sleeping infant a little higher onto his shoulder and pulled a decanter out from under the massive bar. "Drink?"

Jon shook his head. "No, thank you. I don't drink."



“Anymore?”

“I never did.” Too late, Jon realized his mistake.

Without a word, Knight poured one drink, replaced the decanter, and gestured to two wing-backed chairs near the cold hearth. Jon shook his head, managing a step backwards, closer to the wide, pocket doors. “I don’t even know why I bothered you, Doc. I’ll see myself out.”

“Jon, I know.” Knight gestured again to the chairs. “Abigail knows.”

“What are you talking about?” Bravado seemed to be his only recourse.

“I know you’re not Jonathan English. The day she released you, Victoria talked to Abigail first. My wife swore that I would be the only one she told, and both my wife and Victoria made me swear to secrecy.” Knight sat in one of the chairs, settled his glass on a small table at his elbow, and then deftly eased the baby off his shoulder to cradle her in his arms. “I can imagine it hasn’t been easy being someone you aren’t.”

Iverson, the doctor, and the doc’s wife...Jon pulled shaking hands through his wet hair. “Does everyone in town know and they’re making a laughing stock of Victoria?”

“To the best of my knowledge, just Abby, Victoria, you and I are the only people who know you aren’t Jonathan English.” The baby stirred, her tiny face scrunching with a mewling cry. The doctor paused to run a slow and calming hand down his infant daughter’s back. “Unless I had been told otherwise, I wouldn’t have known one way or another. I never met the man, though from what I’ve heard, I wouldn’t have thought much of him.”

Jon sank into the chair across from Knight, a broken, unamused laugh rippling from him. “It would be safe to say I don’t think much of him.”

The infant sounded a louder, angrier cry. Knight patted her back, and the baby calmed again. “You knocked on my door for some reason.”

A shiver raced over Jon, and he wasn’t entirely certain it was just because he was soaking wet and chilled. He let his gaze skip over the ostentatious room. “Yeah, I guess I did.” He cleared his throat but still couldn’t find the words he needed. A section of the brass footrail on the bar drew his sight and held it.

“Ask for a friend.”

Jon snapped his gaze back to the doctor, his sight again drawn to the sleeping tiny baby cradled to the man’s chest. “For a friend?”

Knight nodded, a half-smile twisting up a corner of his mouth. He lifted his so-far untouched drink. “Had a lot of men during the war

who wanted to know all sorts of cures for a 'friend' who had been someplace that friend shouldn't have gone."

"That isn't my...friend's problem." Jon looked away from sleeping infant. "When I...when my friend was a child, he would sleepwalk."

"Is your friend experiencing episodes of somnambulism, again?"

Jon didn't know how to answer that. He was certain he had no idea what the doctor asked him.

"Is your friend sleepwalking?" Knight leaned into the tall back of the upholstered chair, stretching his legs and crossing them at the ankles. "It's been a trying few days with this little one so colicky."

"Yeah. Doc, the sleepwalking is a problem, but that I might...my friend might...hell, Doc, we both know I'm talking about myself." Jon leaned forward in the chair, elbows on his knees. "Could I do things while I'm sleepwalking that I wouldn't do if I was wide awake?"

Knight's relaxed attitude didn't alter. He sipped his drink as if contemplating his answer. A slow shake of his head accompanied the return of the glass to the side table. "During the recent unpleasantness, I saw men who found ways to silence the voice of their conscience. It's the only way to explain the deliberate inhumanity I observed and was subjected to. I refuse to believe those men were that cruel and vicious in every aspect of their lives. I also saw men who bolstered their courage time and again with alcohol and laudanum. Just last year, the biggest braggart in Brokken puffed himself up with so much laudanum he felt brave enough to point a gun at several of us."

"I'm not drunk, and I'm not using laudanum. I'm sleepwalking, which is worse, because I don't remember anything when I do." Jon stood, unable to sit any longer. "Can I do things while I'm sleepwalking that I wouldn't even think of doing when I'm awake?"

"What things?"

Jon walked to the teak bar. An intricately worked starburst pattern delineated the exact middle of the graceful curve, flanked by smaller yet just as detailed starbursts. Someone had spent a lot of time and he assumed money to create such a beautiful piece of work. He pressed his palms onto the bar, covering the largest rays on the right and left of the center star. "I think I—the night Lavender's dogs were killed, I came back late from the Brokken Arrow. I fell asleep in the saddle and woke when my horse crossed the west bridge. I don't remember how I got outside of town, it's completely out of my way home, and my horse was muddy and wet, as if it had crossed the creek."

"You think you did that to those little dogs?" A slight change entered the doctor's voice, an underlying tautness.

"I don't know." He continued to stare into the depths of the intricate wood pattern. "If I did, I can't remember it. And, if I did,

Victoria made a huge mistake by not sending me back to the prison I escaped from, because if I did that while I was sleepwalking, I'm afraid I've done much worse."



# Chapter Fifteen

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“S<sub>heriff!</sub>”

Victoria stopped under the overhang in front of the Brokken General Store, waiting for Kyle Levinson the telegraph operator to join her. Would this rain ever stop? A fourth day of continual rain gave everything in town a sodden, gray, weary appearance. Even the new false façades looked tired.

Kyle shook the rain off his head like a dog emerging from a pond. Victoria leaped back. “I’m wet enough, thank you.”

Levinson had the grace to appear chagrined. “Sorry, Sheriff.” He reached into an inside pocket of his sopping wet coat and pulled out a small, folded piece of paper. “It’s still dry. It’s for Jonathan.”

“For Jonathan?” A chill she couldn’t define clawed the length of her spine. “From whom?”

“That Colbert fellow he made me send a telegram to last night.”

The chill clawing her spine became a knife thrust into her heart. Levinson extended the missive to her. “Will you give this to your husband?”

“He sent a telegram last night...when?” Victoria stared at the small piece of paper in Levinson hand as if it was a rattler coiled to strike.

“Sometime around two in the morning.”

It couldn’t have been Jon. They’d bid each other a good-night around nine or nine-thirty, and when she woke at three, unable to fall back asleep, he was sound asleep on the chesterfield, securely wrapped in a quilt as if it was a protective cocoon.

Irritation added a sharp edge to the telegrapher’s voice. “Woke me up out of a sound sleep and insisted I send that telegram immediately. I tried to tell him it would have to wait until morning because no one would be awake to get it. He threatened me. Said if I didn’t send it, he’d arrest me.”

“What did the telegram he sent say?” Victoria’s constricted throat made her force the words out.

“It was short, so it didn’t cost the sheriff’s office a lot. Just said ‘Andrews in Brokken, Texas.’ Only cost two bits. I gotta ask, though. Who’s Andrews?”

Victoria stared across the street at the jail, the building blurring in and out of focus through the sudden driving rain. “No one you have to

worry about, Kyle.”

Levinson shoved the return missive toward her again. “You gonna take this or do I have to go deliver it?”

“I’ll take it.” She closed her hand around the telegram, the blade she was certain lodged in her heart twisting so fiercely she couldn’t draw in a breath. Levinson turned and trotted away, his head ducked into the rain.

Victoria slowly opened the folded page and scanned the few words. Her hand crept to her mouth, unable to stop the small whimper of “Oh, no...Jon, what have you done?” when the world reduced to the few sparse words of Colbert’s response.

*Arriving Brokken in two days.*

The jail again drew her gaze. The wind and rain drove the smoke from the small chimney to a right angle, carrying it away from town. She glanced at the telegram, her fingers closing into a fist, crumpling the page as surely as her heart crumbled.

With a squaring of her shoulders, she stepped off the boardwalk. She barely felt the chill in the rain, or the cut of the wind. Her heart ached too much.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the jail. Without a word, Jon stood and poured the steaming brew into her cup. Victoria halted in the center of the floor. The agony in her heart should be fatal.

“When were you going to tell me about this?” She continued to clutch the crushed telegram. “When he showed up?”

Jon extended the cup toward her, his brow knitting with confusion. “What am I supposed to tell you? When who shows up?”

“Don’t do this.” Her voice broke with her struggle to keep from screaming with the pain. “Just tell me why you did it.”

“I’m lost.” Jon placed the tin cup on the stovetop. “What am I not supposed to do? Better yet, what did I do?”

She threw the wadded paper onto the desk, and then deliberately smoothed it. “Are you telling me you didn’t wake Kyle up last night to send a telegram?”

Something shifted in his expression. He glanced over her shoulder, tilted his head down, eyes narrowing. An undercurrent of something she couldn’t quite define colored his words. “Not that I remember.”

Frustration threaded through the searing pain. “You don’t remember sending a telegram to Colbert?”

His head snapped up. “No. I didn’t send...I wouldn’t...Kyle said I woke him up to send it?”

“Said you threatened to arrest him if he didn’t send it immediately.”

Jon stumbled a step backwards, hunched into himself. He stumbled another step, falling into the chair next to her desk. “I don’t

remember.”

She'd never been forced, in all her time she had served as sheriff, to shoot a man down. Jon's reaction was what she assumed a man taking a bullet to the gut would be like. “How can you not remember that?”

“I can't.” He shook his head, every vestige of color drained from his face. “I said good-night to you about nine. At midnight, I remember that I was by the saloon. I don't remember how I got there, or why I was there. I remember seeing a lantern lit at the telegraph office.”

“Let me get this straight. You got up, got dressed, walked in a pouring rain, and you don't remember it?” She slapped her palms onto the desktop. “It doesn't make any sense.”

“I know it doesn't.” Jon deliberately removed the deputy's badge from his shirt and set it down on the battered desk dominating the small jail as carefully as if it were made of the finest bone china. He stood and lifted a pair of manacles from the pegs behind him and extended them to her. “Maybe, I did send that telegram. Maybe, some part of me knows that even if I can't remember it, I did things that should keep me behind bars...Put these on me.”

“No.” She swallowed, certain a pound of ground glass slid down her throat and lodged where her broken heart had been. “Jon, I don't understand. You escaped. No one was seriously questioning if you were Jonathan.”

He lowered the manacles to the desk but wouldn't look at her. After several long moments that felt more like an eternity, he drew in a long breath.

“I sleepwalk, Vic.” The pain in those words was palpable.

She wanted to demand what that had to do with anything, but she bit her tongue. Somehow, that fact meant a lot to his reasoning for as much as signing his own death warrant.

“I did it a lot as a kid. I thought I'd stopped sleepwalking.” Another deep breath, though this one wasn't as steady as the previous. “And I don't remember what I do when I sleepwalk. That woman up in the Indian Territories...I think I never back-tracked to that house, but I can't be sure.”

A chill whispered the length of her spine. Surely, he couldn't believe he had killed that homesteader's wife. “You didn't kill her. I know in my heart—”

“I'm not certain of that. I'm not certain of anything, any more. The night you found me pacing on the back porch, I had to have been sleepwalking. I don't remember getting dressed, going outside, not even how I scratched the back of my hand.”

“That doesn't mean you had anything to do—”

He cut her off again. "The night Lavender's dogs were killed, I fell asleep in the saddle. I woke up when the horse went across the west bridge *into town*. I wasn't leaving town when I woke up." He lifted his head to finally meet her gaze. "I'm not even sure anymore if it was Jonathan who killed those soldiers in their sleep at Tullahoma."

"That's ridiculous." Victoria fought the urge to shake him.

"I was covered in blood when I woke up after that grapeshot exploded." He dropped his head to study the floor at his feet. "My bedroll and jacket were gone, but so was my horse. I couldn't swear that I was in the same place as I was when that cannister exploded. When I finally woke up, it was after the men in my regiment had been butchered."

"You said a cannister of grapeshot exploded, knocking you and Jonathan from your horses and leaving you unconscious. You were in the middle of a battle, for heaven's sake. Of course, you'd be covered in blood." Victoria gripped his lower arm. "You didn't kill those men. You didn't kill that homesteader's wife. You didn't kill either Landry or Lavender's dogs."

"Has anyone seen your husband since Tullahoma? For all I know, I killed him, too." He flung off her hand. His slow steps carried him deep into the cell, his back to her. "I could have taken *his* identity."

That thought had occurred to her when he first claimed Jonathan had stolen his name. Victoria closed the looming distance between them and wrapped her arms around his waist. She pressed the side of her face against his back. "Just because no one has seen him since that day, doesn't mean he's dead. If he's dead and *if* you killed him, it was in the heat of battle."

"How can you be so sure when I'm not?"

"You're not a killer, Jon." The warmth of his body against hers, under her cheek, melted the chill in her breast. "Did you do anything like you're saying you did when you had sleepwalking episodes as a child? Did you hurt anything then?"

"No."

"What makes you think you could be capable of any of that now?" Without waiting for him to answer, she stepped in front of him. The anguish in his gaze, darkening his eyes, tore through her. She wrapped her arms around him again and lowered her head to his chest, willing the tension and rigidity in his frame to ease. The steady beating of his heart echoed in her. "You are not a killer, Jon Andrews, no matter what that war did to you. It didn't make you into a killer."

He finally dropped his chin to the top of her head and eased in a long, even breath, and then enfolded her into his embrace. "What do we do now?"

Victoria let her thoughts ramble, accompanied by the sound of his



heartbeat. "We have to kill you."

"We...we do what?"

She looked up into his face. "You go away for a little while. There's an accident, or something."

"Or something?" His brow arched.

"You send a telegram as someone else, claiming Jonathan is dead." Victoria continued to ramble, trying to work out the details to this crazy plan even as she spoke. "If he's dead, Jon Andrews can reclaim his stolen life."

Jon's brow arched even higher. "In case you've forgotten, Jon Andrews is a wanted escapee with a substantial reward offered."

"I didn't say this was perfect." She dropped her head to his chest again, her frayed nerves calming as soon as the sound of his heartbeat thrummed in her ear. "I'm open to other suggestions."



VICTORIA GLANCED AROUND the general store. Her inspection of the creeks and rivers surrounding Brokken added to her worry. Even if the rain stopped immediately, Brokken could find itself cut off from the outside world. Blueberry and Lighter Knot Creeks had already risen out of their banks, submerging the west bridge. The train tracks were less than a foot above water and the east road was, by her best guess, at least three feet under water. The rain seemed to be keeping almost everyone indoors and at home, though Lavender and Sophia were in the area of the store where Curt displayed the fabric bolts, discussing the newest fabric selections. Curt met her gaze, his brows lifting in a silent query when she didn't move from just a few feet away from the door.

"Can I help you with something, Sheriff?" the store-owner asked.

"I need a favor." Victoria shoved her hands into the pockets of her trousers, hoping to hide how much they trembled. So much depended on how much she could actually trust Curt. The charade she and Jon played was now a matter of life and death.

"Whatever you need, Victoria, it's yours. What do you need from me?"

"Not here." Victoria shook her head, noting how the other women attempted to appear disinterested. Their tilted heads, sudden silence, and feigned rapt attention to the bolt of calico Lavender held belied that indifference. "Will you meet me at the bank in half an hour?"

Curt's brows shot up even as he slowly nodded. "The conference room at the bank?"

"Yes, that room will work." Victoria hesitated, then asked, "Will Karl be there?" She didn't ask about Fritz, not after the youngest

Brokken had repeatedly bald-faced lied to her.

Curt's brows rose further in surprise. "I'd assume so." He slid a quick glance in Lavender and Sophia's direction. "Should I find something for him to do while you and I talk?"

The Brokken brothers had trusted one another with their lives. Victoria slowly shook her head. "I'll meet you at the bank in a little while."

The door hadn't even completely closed behind her when Victoria heard Lavender announce, "You have to tell us what that was all about, Curt Brokken."

She paused just long enough to toss a practiced perusal of main street, her sight lingering for a moment on the jail. This had to work. If it didn't, she could find herself in her own jail for aiding an escaped prisoner. Worse, Jon would lose his life. This had to work.

By the time she crossed the street, her feet were encased in mud. She was certain each boot weighed at least ten pounds. There had been talk before the war of paving the main streets with brick, but the war had ended that discussion. Fresh anger welled in her. That damned war...

She paused outside the bank to scrape as much of the mud off the bottom and sides of her boots as she could along the edge of the boardwalk. No sense in aggravating Karl. The man was as persnickety about his bank building as any house-proud woman she'd ever met.

The interior of the bank always daunted her—composed of dark woods and brass. She wondered if it had been purposefully built in that manner, to intimidate anyone looking to the bank for a loan. The conference room was even more overwhelming, dominated with the large, nearly black table, seemingly carved of a single piece of wood. The few times she had been in that room and had a chance to study the table, she'd never seen a single place where the wood had been seamed. Franklin Brokken had hired a master woodworker to construct the bank and the home at the Brokken Arrow. Her failure to find the joining in the table only reinforced that title of master.

Karl looked up from the ledgers behind the teller's counter. "Sheriff?"

"I'm meeting Curt here in about fifteen minutes. I'd like to use the conference room." A chill that had nothing to do with the dampness settled deep in her and the thought whispered through her that if this didn't work...She silenced that whisper with a clenching of her jaw. It would work.

"Certainly. I'll go start the fire to warm the room." He made his way out from behind the counter. "Would you and Curt like some coffee?"

Victoria nodded and rubbed her hands together, startled at how icy

her fingers felt. "Yes. Thank you. And, when Curt gets here, would you please join us?"

Karl dipped his head in acquiescence. He turned to Klint Caper, the head teller. "Can you handle everything while I'm in this sudden meeting with my brother and the sheriff?"

Caper sent a tense, tight-lipped smile across the bank's foyer. "Not a problem, Mr. Brokken."

Karl gestured for Victoria to proceed him into the meeting room. Opulent wasn't a word Victoria often used, and even though it didn't fully encompass the meeting room, she supposed it came close. Not a sound encroached in this space. The deep Oriental rugs on the floor muffled the sound of her boot heels. The thick, heavily leaded glass windows prevented all but the loudest exterior noises from intruding. Dark wood paneling, polished and gleaming, reached from floor to ceiling, broken only on one wall with more leaded glass, this time for a set of built-in cabinets that housed the bank's silver coffee set. The brass and crystal chandelier positioned in the exact center of the room and exactly over the middle of the large table did little to bring lightness into the oppressive room. Even the lemon oil scenting the air didn't relieve the heaviness.

Karl lit the logs on the hearth, and when the flames licked eagerly at the dried wood, pulled the screen closed. He rounded the table to the built-in cabinets and withdrew the coffee service. "I'll return in a few minutes with the coffee. You take yours with cream and sugar? Would you care for a few scones with marmalade?"

"Black, thank you." The mention of the orange marmalade broke a little of the anxiety tightening her throat and added an unforced smile to her lips. "I'll pass on the scones, unless the marmalade is of that special batch you and your brothers put together."

"Sadly, all of that marmalade is gone." Amusement sparkled in Karl's eyes behind his gold-rimmed eye-glasses. "Have a seat, Sheriff," the middle of the Brokken brothers said and he left the room.

Victoria stood near a wall, afraid to even touch one of the intricately carved chair backs for fear of leaving her fingerprints on the gleaming, polished surface.

When Karl returned, Curt flanked his brother. Curt shut the door and the only sound shattering the strained, awkward silence was that of the silver service making contact with the table.

"What's this all about, Victoria?" Curt asked.

She had to put all her cards on the table. It was the only way it would work. "It wasn't Jonathan English who came back to Brokken."

The brothers exchanged a glance that wasn't shocked or surprised. "We know," Curt flatly stated.

"You know? How?"

Curt pulled a chair out from the table, dropped into it, and poured himself a cup of coffee. "Men his age don't grow two inches in height."

"And very few forget they had an account here with a couple hundred dollars in it," Karl added.

Victoria blinked with the revelations from the Brokkens. She knew nothing of the account at the bank. "Why didn't you say something?"

"We figured it was none of our business. If you were satisfied he was Jonathan, it wasn't our place to point out he isn't." Karl poured two cups, placing one on the table near Victoria. "Though, I admit, determining how you couldn't realize he's not your missing husband has led to some interesting speculation."

Victoria dropped her palms onto the tabletop, struggling to comprehend how it seemed everyone knew the secret she and Jon fought to keep, while at the same, hoped to hide how red her face must be. "Does everyone in town know this?"

"Probably," Curt admitted. "I've heard enough gossip in the store to make that assumption. So, who is he really?"

A polite rapping on the door forestalled Victoria's answer. The heavy door eased open enough to allow Caper to poke his head into the room. "Mr. English is here. He said the sheriff asked him to join you here."



# Chapter Sixteen

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If he could judge by the less than contrived blank expressions, the shared glance the Brokken brothers passed between them, and the tension marring Victoria's features, he'd timed his arrival just right.

"The man of the hour," Karl said as he removed his eye-glasses and bent his head, studiously polishing the lenses with what Jon took to be a silk handkerchief. He caught Victoria's gaze. A warning nudge of her head halted his response to the banker's sarcasm.

Curt broke the strained silence. "Who are you, really?"

Jon admired Curt's directness even as he walked closer to the fire crackling and popping on the hearth, intentionally cutting off his only route of escape from the room. "Jon Andrews."

The brothers reacted in the same manner: heads snapped up, shoulders pulled back, and anger shimmered across the room. Curt levered out of the chair, his expression freezing in a snarl. "Of the Andrews gang?"

Jon canted a quick look to Victoria and then returned his gaze to the oldest brother. "What gang?"

"A group of outlaws who showed up here about six months ago. They thought..." Curt trailed off for a long pause. "Doesn't matter what they thought. They shot the town up, set fire to a lot of the buildings, and killed two people. Edna Snider, our schoolteacher, was killed in the crossfire while protecting the few kids left here. Pretty odd coincidence your last name and that group's name is the same."

"I had nothing to do with that, Curt." Jon levelly met the store-owner's angry gaze.

The oldest Brokken's expression slid into a sneer even as he looked away and then sank into the chair again.

"Jon was held in the prison in Watonga when the Andrews gang was here," Victoria said, her voice soft with what he recognized as a mingling of pain and failure.

Karl leaned back in his chair, settling his eye-glasses on, and methodically wrapping the ear-pieces around his ears. "Watonga? Curt, unless he was rapping out instructions in Morse code to that gang of outlaws while he was breaking rocks, he couldn't have been involved."

Jon held his breath through the tension-filled moments while Curt

weighed his younger brother's words. Victoria's stiff posture held on the edge of his vision. Finally, Curt heaved out a deep breath. "All right, Victoria, you asked all of us here for a reason. What is it?"

Victoria nodded to Jon. He swallowed the sudden large lump in his throat. "One of you has to kill me."

Curt and Karl slowly tilted their heads to Victoria, Karl shooting an eyebrow up over the rim of his eye-glasses.

"Now, or would you like us to give you a few minutes to say good-bye to your *wife*?" Curt asked.

"Curt, this is not a joke." Victoria leaned forward, her palms once more pressing into the table. "If we can't convince Alva Colbert Jon is dead when he arrives here in less than two days, Jon will die."

Another subtle interplay of little more than a sidelong glance was shared by the brothers. Jon pulled out a chair farthest from the two and closest to the fire, then slowly sank into it. Karl looked down the table, his sudden intense gaze lingering on a point just behind Jon. He fought the urge to look over his shoulder to see whatever held the banker's hard stare.

"Sit down, Victoria," Karl said in a low voice, "and start at the beginning so Curt and I know exactly what it is you want to get us involved with."

Victoria nodded and made her way to the end of the table. The misgiving and tension knotting Jon's stomach vanished when she sat next to him and took his hand into hers. Maybe, this would work. Maybe, there was a chance he could come out of this alive. She spoke in rapid, short sentences, relating everything Jon recalled telling her, including how Jonathan English had stolen Jon's identity. The brothers shared yet another sidelong glance and this time, Victoria caught it.

"What is it?" She leaned closer to the other end of the table. "What was that look for?"

"Nothing," Karl said with a dismissive shake of his head. "How did this Colbert character learn Jonath...Jon...whatever his name is wound up in Brokken?"

Victoria's fingers tightened on his. The troublesome lump returned, causing his breath to catch. Jon cleared his throat. "I sleepwalk. According to Mr. Levinson, I woke him the other night, insisting he send a telegram to Colbert. I don't remember it, but I was sleepwalking that night."

"You were sleepwalking, in the rain, and you woke Levinson to send a telegram?" Curt drummed his fingers on the polished surface of the table. "Something isn't right in that story."

"I don't have a death wish." Jon paused to try to ease the painful tension in his gut. "In a wide-awake state, I wouldn't send Colbert

anything.”

Karl's head lifted, and the place over Jon's shoulder seemed to hold his attention again. This time, Jon twisted around, attempting to see what the banker stared at. A single painting of a mountain stream rushing past dark and jagged boulders, the mountains black and rugged, with a storming sky filled the wall. How he had missed the imposing and foreboding image startled him.

“Maybe,” Karl mused, his gaze never leaving the disturbing painting, “you didn't send that telegram.”

Something in Karl's pensive words struck a chord with the older Brokken. Curt snorted. “Karl, Fritz over-reacted. He's always done that. There's not a chance—”

“Fritz is adamant he saw—”

“What he saw was from a good three hundred feet away, through the trees, and from the back.” Curt threw his hands up, in a gesture that clearly screamed his exasperation. “Fritz was more concerned with seeing you and me in that mess. We never saw him, and we were stuck riding with them for almost a week.”

“We were blindfolded, with sacks over our heads the whole time,” Karl countered, a similar frustrated edge to his words.

“What are you two talking about?” Victoria's voice rang in the room, the edge to her words not blunted by the muffling effect of the heavy fixtures.

If Victoria was confused, Jon was hopelessly lost. Karl pulled his sight from the painting over Jon's shoulder, meeting Jon's gaze for a long moment. The banker gestured to Curt. “While Curt doesn't believe Fritz, I'm inclined to believe him now. When the Andrews's gang was here, Fritz swore he saw Jonathan in that group—leading it, in fact.”

“The man Fritz saw wore a bandanna over half his face, and Fritz admitted he only caught a glimpse of him. On the other hand, Karl and I were dragged along with the gang for five days, and we never once saw Jonathan or heard him.” A marked edge clipped every word Curt said. “Andrews here sending a telegram in his sleep is more plausible than Jonathan being the head of an outlaw gang.”

While Curt wasn't giving any credence to Fritz's claims, Victoria was. Her fingers tightened painfully on Jon's hand and the stillness to her form reminded him of a rabbit frozen in fear. Anger filled him, boiling in its intensity. “That gang was here six months ago and neither one of you has bothered to say a word to Victoria about it in all this time?”

“To be fair,” Karl said, his head dipping toward the table, “until now, I didn't put much stock in what Fritz said he saw.”

“I'm still not putting any stock in it.” Curt shoved away from the



table and marched in a determined manner to the door. "When you figure out how to make your false husband dead, let me know."

"It was Jonathan." Victoria's thin pronouncement stopped the store-owner cold.

Curt looked over his shoulder. "Vic, he's dead. That's what Deb and I both told Fritz. He's dead because if he wasn't, you know he'd be back here."

As if she realized just how fiercely she gripped his hand, Victoria eased her hold. Her chattering teeth were audible before Jon saw her jaw clench. More than anything, he wanted to wrap her in his arms and promise to keep her safe, but he couldn't make that promise.

"If it wasn't Jonathan Fritz saw, you explain to me how that gang knew the names of the people in this town." An undercurrent of metal forged as strong as railroad track entered her voice, removing any weakness. "Explain to me how that gang knew where to position themselves to cut off any outside assistance, if Jonathan is dead and not leading that gang."

*If* her husband was still alive, still in the area, and leading a gang of outlaws, it changed everything. And changed nothing. Jon slowly shook his head. "Even if it was your husband—" The word stuck in his throat and felt as bitter on his tongue as poison. "—it doesn't help us at the moment."

"We can prove it wasn't you; it was Jonathan." Victoria's fingers tightened on his hand again. "Jon, we can prove—"

"I'm not wanted by Colbert for anything Jonathan did while he hid behind my name."

Curt's slow steps back to the table brought a long moment of silence into the room, broken only by the occasional pop of the flames on the hearth and the muffled, distant wail of the evening train. He lowered himself into the chair recently vacated. "As the majority in this room are accepting the highly improbable as plausible, we're back to killing you."

Jon recoiled with the icy glare Curt shot at him. The store-owner's anger was both puzzling and disconcerting. With a start, he realized where it came from. With Jonathan dead, Curt probably believed he could court Victoria, though why the man hadn't tried in the intervening years was another question. Had Victoria been the one who doused those flames?

"Curt, we owe Victoria." Karl leaned an elbow onto the table, closer to his older brother.

"Enough to risk going to jail? We'd be helping an escaped convict."

Karl bolted from his chair, grabbing Curt's upper arm in the same motion. "We were willing to go to jail for father. The sheriff, the others in town, we owe it to them. This is saving a man's life."

Curt's jaw clenched, and looked away from his brother, not answering Karl. Jon realized he never would. Too much stood in the way of Curt Brokken ever acceding to Karl: Curt's own pride, perhaps; his obvious and real fear of imprisonment; and maybe his hopes of winning Victoria. Two of the three, Jon probably could persuade him differently. The last...Jon stood, immediately drawing the attention of the two brothers. "No one is asking either of you to do anything you feel you can't do. Karl, as far as anyone is concerned, I'm still Jonathan English, right?"

Karl straightened, and without turning to him, still craned his head in Jon's direction. "Yes."

"I'd like to close that account you told me about the other day. I need to purchase a horse and provisions."

Victoria's breath caught on a ragged hitch. He sensed, more than saw, her leap out of the chair. Both her hands closed around his lower arm. "Jon, no. You'll spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder."

As gently as he could, he extracted his arm. "At least I'll have a life." He turned to her, caught her face between his hands, and tilted her head up to him. A knife felt as if it was lodged in his chest with the sight of the tears filling her eyes. "Not the life that I let myself believe I could have the last week or so, but it's a life."

"Curt." Karl's voice crackled with anger. "This isn't right."

From the corner of his eye, Jon watched Curt walk from the room, leaving only Victoria, Karl, and himself. Karl heaved out a deep breath. "I'll go close the account. When you go to the livery to buy a horse, tell Mrs. Walsh you want Froggy. And, tell her to send me the bill."

Without taking his sight off Victoria, Jon managed a single nod. Neither moved, barely breathed, until the door closed with a soft click.

"Don't, Jon. Please."

The break in her voice almost undid his resolve to run. He pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead, her ragged breath falling into a soft cry.

"I don't want to leave. I don't want to leave you." He pulled her tightly against him, asking for strength. "Unless you can immediately come up with another option, I'll have about a twenty-four hour head start."

Garbled shouting penetrated through the heavy oak door. Jon backed slightly away from Victoria but didn't open his embrace. He caught her wrist as she dropped her hand onto the grip of her ever-present revolver and shook his head.

The door was flung open and bounced off the wall next to it.

“It’s a private meeting. You can’t go in...” Karl’s angry protest faded.

There would be no head start. Alva Colbert stood in the open doorway, two of his hand-picked guards behind him.



# Chapter Seventeen

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Before Victoria could even register who the three newcomers were, the two behind the portly, white-headed, heavily bearded man charged into the room, directly at her and Jon. Without even a conscious thought, Victoria stepped between Jon and the men, had her revolver cleared of leather and cocked before those men were halfway around either side of the table. “One more step from either one of you and I’ll splatter your brains all over this polished room.”

“Gentlemen, give the lady some space.” The unfamiliar voice belonged to the portly stranger.

Victoria didn’t look to the man still in the doorway. Her sight skipped from side to side. “That’s sheriff to you, mister. I don’t know who you are or who you think you are, but no one rushes me or my husband like that.”

To her relief, Jon didn’t dispute their marital status.

“I’m so sorry that introductions weren’t made.” The smile crossing his face curdled her blood. “I’m Alva Colbert, and I believe you sent me a telegram, *Sheriff*.”

Victoria snapped the revolver to her right, to take a steady aim on the man slowly advancing toward her. “Back up.”

When he retreated several steps, her gaze moved between Colbert’s two men. “About that telegram...we’re a very small town. Gossip travels fast. Andrews must have gotten wind of it and he’s gone.”

“Sheriff, please don’t insult my intelligence. The man you’re claiming as your husband is my prisoner.” Colbert’s smile broadened, and he finally lifted his sight to Jon. “Andrews, I have to hand it to you. Very smart, seducing the sheriff.”

Jon audibly swallowed.

“But the chase is over, and I will take you back to Watonga.” The false smile faded with the lethal promise in Colbert’s voice. “You can come quietly, and we can do this the easy way, or we do it the hard way. Either way, you will come with me.”

Both of Colbert’s men charged again. Victoria didn’t think, merely aimed at one and shot. Her bullet hit his arm and spun him around. In a blur, she brought the revolver into a firing position but her second target was on her, brandishing a small club of some sort.

Jon shoved her out of the way. Victoria stumbled backward, losing

her aim at the second assailant. Jon's shoulder took the full brunt of the man's swing. The man she winged suddenly had a revolver in his hand, pointing it at her head.

"Andrews! On your knees, hands behind your head, or she dies. Sheriff, drop your gun, or I will kill him." Colbert's voice never rose above a conversational level yet somehow the words felt to be louder than a cannon blast.

Victoria cast a frightened glance at Colbert. A small amount of admiration coursed through her with the sight of the small derringer he held. Unfortunately, the little gun was just as deadly at this close distance as the revolver aimed at her head and the revolver she continued to clutch.

"Put it down, Victoria, please," Jon managed as he raised his hands. A grimace crossed his face as his shoulder moved. He slowly dropped to his knees. "Don't give him an excuse to hurt you."

Years ago, when Jonathan taught her to play chess, she realized it had just been another way for him to belittle her. He stopped challenging her to games when she learned enough to begin forcing a checkmate more than half the time and winning almost as often as she lost. They'd reached checkmate.

She blinked against the burning of her eyes. Her raw throat made taking in another breath almost impossible, and she was certain her heart was shattered. The table was within arm's reach. Without taking her gaze from Jon's defeated form, she leaned toward the dark wood and set her revolver on the highly-polished surface.

"Slide it down the table toward me," Colbert said.

Victoria gave the gun a shove. It spun its way down the length of the table, almost to Colbert's reach.

As the man leaned forward to take her weapon, movement just outside the opened door caught her eye. The sharp cracking of a round being chambered home froze Colbert in the ungainly position bent over the table as Clint Caper pressed the muzzle of a rifle into the base of his skull. Curt stood next to Caper, another rifle drawn up and aimed at the wounded man's head. Curt jacked a round home, though the muzzle never wavered.

"Push that revolver back to the sheriff, mister." Caper's voice never changed from his usual, light, almost teasing tone. When Colbert hesitated, Caper nudged the muzzle against his head. "Please. I don't want to have to replace this table, and Mr. Brokken would insist I do that because if I pull this trigger, the round will go clean through your skull and through Mr. Brokken's shiny table."

"You're right." Karl stepped into the room, a third rifle aimed at the man brandishing the club over Jon. "You'd ruin the table and then you'd have to buy a new one. You can't afford to do that."

“Especially on the salary you pay me,” Caper quipped.

The levity in Klint Caper’s voice felt grotesque everything considered. Victoria quelled the urge to scream. Less than five feet away from her, a man she’d never seen before pointed a gun at her head. Jon was on his knees, grimacing in pain, hands behind his head while another man brandished what she recognized as a blackjack over Jon’s head.

“You can’t see what’s behind you, mister, but there are two more rifles aimed at your boys.” The lightness faded from Caper’s voice. “I’ve asked you once to slide that revolver back to the sheriff. I won’t ask again.”

The revolver returned to Victoria along the same path it had taken. Victoria seized the gun and then aimed it at the man holding a weapon on her. “On the table,” she said, jerking her chin at the massive piece.

When he hesitated, Curt said, “It isn’t worth dying for. Whatever he’s paying you, I doubt it’s enough to merit throwing your life away. Do what the sheriff told you to do.”

The glare Colbert’s man shot Victoria sent a shudder through her. He held that glare the whole time he slowly lowered his weapon and then placed it on the table. “Everyone in this town do what you tell ‘em to do?”

“The smart ones do.” To her amazement, her voice didn’t break or tremble.

Without any seeming cue from Caper, Curt rounded the table on one side, Karl the other and both gestured with the cocked and aimed rifles for Colbert’s men to move away from her and Jon. “Separate corners, boys,” Caper suggested, though there was no doubt in Victoria’s mind it wasn’t a suggestion.

As soon as Curt and Karl had Colbert’s men in corners, Victoria holstered her revolver and helped Jon to his feet. The color drained from his face when he moved his left arm, and his right hand went to his shoulder, a grimace of intense pain twisting his features.

“I think the collarbone broke,” Jon said.

Caper twisted a fist into the collar of Colbert’s tweed frock coat, pulling the man erect. “What do you want us to do with these three, Sheriff?”

Jon cradled his arm. His jaw clenched and sweat beaded on his brow.

The temptation to pistol whip all three of them materialized, and just as quickly dissolved. Victoria wrapped an arm around Jon’s waist. “I’m taking you to see Mathew.”

Jon barely nodded, a deeper grimace marring the planes of his face with the motion.

“Sheriff?”

Victoria turned her attention to Caper though she aimed her words at Colbert. “You come into my town, point a gun at me, question my integrity, abuse my husband...Put them in the jail, Mr. Caper, and wait there for me, if you would.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re arresting us?” Colbert’s round face flushed a bright red and his voice rose in pitch.

“You catch on fast,” Victoria shot at him, as she assisted Jon through the door. “I’ll send the doctor to the jail for your *friend*.”



WITH HIS ARM IMMOBILIZED with layers of wide linen, one of Abigail’s poultices lathered thickly over the break in his collarbone, and dosed with laudanum for the pain, Jon slid into sleep, as Mathew said he should. Victoria and Abigail left him to sleep in the front parlor of the former brothel.

“I have to go to the jail,” Victoria said, keeping her voice at a soft whisper.

Abigail shook her head, catching her arm. “No. You said Klint is there. I can’t imagine that Curt or Karl aren’t with him. You need a few minutes.”

At the mention of the Brokken brother’s names, a white-hot anger seared through her chest. If either of them had mentioned they thought they saw Jonathan at the head of that outlaw gang six months ago—if any of the four of the Brokken siblings, for that matter had mentioned it—she wouldn’t be at the impasse she found herself. And, Jon wouldn’t have had to try to live a total lie. How easy it seemed to be for every single one of the Brokkens to lie.

“I don’t have the time. I have to figure out how to save Jon’s life.” An indistinct murmur sounded in the room behind her. Victoria looked over her shoulder, assuring herself Jon was still asleep. “I can’t keep those three men locked up at all.”

“You’ve got a little bit of time, at least until Jon’s shoulder heals. Surely they wouldn’t drag him across country on horseback with...” Abigail trailed off.

Victoria wasn’t sure if her friend fell silent because of the disbelieving stare she shot at Abigail, or if she remembered how brutalized Jon was when he first showed up in Brokken.

“What are we going to do?”

“We? Abigail Knight, *you* are going to do nothing.” Victoria walked a little farther away from the opened parlor door. “If anyone asks, you were certain he was my presumed dead and miraculously returned



husband.”

“What good does that do Jon?”

“Nothing.” Just saying that word burned her throat. “But it protects you from being charged and possibly convicted of aiding and abetting an escaped felon. You have Ethan and Josephine and Ezra to worry about. They need their Momma. Mathew needs his wife, too. I won’t risk you going to jail.”

“You’re not thinking of running, are you?” Abigail’s fingers tightened on her arm and tears shimmered in her friend’s eyes. “Tell me you’re not thinking that.”

For a slender moment, after Mathew determined Jon’s injury didn’t require his expertise and Abigail could handle it, Victoria had thought about pulling Jon toward the livery and mounting up with a hoped-for destination anywhere south of the Rio Grande. Victoria slowly shook her head. She pulled Abigail into her for a long hug. “No, I’m not. I admit, I did entertain the idea for a few moments. But what kind of a life would that be for either Jon or me?”

When they parted, Abigail wiped her eyes, sniffed, and then asked, “So what are we going to do to help your husband?”

The sting behind her eyes had to be from exhaustion. Victoria managed a weak smile. “You’re going to stay here and take care of him. Keep a loaded gun handy. Anyone walks through that door you don’t recognize, shoot. Shoot to kill, because as sure as the sun is going to rise in the east tomorrow, they’ll be here to try to take Jon, and they will kill him.”

That seemed to take some of the starch out of Abigail.

“I’m going to go see Levinson and send a telegram to Judge Davis. Maybe, he can sort this whole mess out. Then, I’m going to the jail and cut Colbert’s men loose and tell those two they have five minutes to get out of town or I arrest them and charge them with vagrancy.” She looked over her shoulder again. “Abby, when the Andrews gang showed up, Fritz swears he saw Jonathan leading them.”

“Fritz? Fritz couldn’t tell the truth to save his own soul.” Abigail’s soft, quiet laugh soothed the jagged edges of Victoria’s heart. She startled when Abigail flung her arms around her and hugged her again. “I heard that story from Deb. I told her if she ever repeated it to you, I would make sure she had something slipped into her morning coffee that would prevent her from ever speaking again. You didn’t need that kind of ridiculous, idle chatter in your life. Not then and certainly not now.”

With a last look into the parlor, assuring herself Jon was sufficiently pain-free and still sleeping due to the laudanum, Victoria left the Knight home. Her telegram to Judge Davis asked him to come to Brokken as soon as possible. And, then she made her way to the jail

in a driving downpour.

The sound of rushing water faintly carried to her. If the rains didn't stop soon, the houses in the low-lying parts of town would begin to flood. So far, that hadn't happened. As it was, Brokken was cut off from the rest of the world. Levinson had to telegraph the railroad office to cancel runs into town as the tracks were under water and there was no manner to ascertain if the railbed hadn't washed away. Just another worry added to her substantial list of problems.

She slogged through the mud, unable to avoid the puddles growing into small ponds in the road. The sight of so many people in the jail took her back when she opened the door. Both cells were occupied—by Colbert and his men. Mathew tied off the last of what appeared to be several stitches in the injured man's arm.

Victoria berated herself for the inaccuracy of her shot. Forced to be honest with herself, she had been aiming to kill the man.

Curt, Karl, and Klint were gathered around her desk, Klint with his muddy boots propped on her desk. Victoria quelled the urge to snap at him to get his filthy feet off her property. If it weren't for the former sharpshooter, Colbert and his men would already be several hours out of town, Jon with them and being battered—if not already dead. She turned her attention to the oldest Brokken.

"Curt, outside, please. I want a word."

Curt levered himself off the edge of the desk. "Probably more than one," he muttered.

Victoria slammed the door shut behind them. She pulled in a fortifying breath. "What made you change your mind? When you left that conference room—"

"I saw those three heading toward the bank." Curt walked to the end of the overhang protecting the boardwalk, his back to her. "Heard the one you shot saying he'd put up five Yankee dollars to be the first to work Andrews over. The laughs from those three with that..."

Victoria's stomach twisted and lurched. The taste of bile burned the back of her throat.

"I followed them to the bank. I don't care what he did to end up in that prison. He was a prisoner, but he's still a human being, not...not..." Curt's voice broke and he slumped, as if a sudden, massive weight fell across his shoulders. "I thought I'd seen the last of that kind of barbarity when Karl and I escaped jail in Mexico. Karl was right about having to do this to save a man's life."

The wind shifted, blowing the chilling rain under the protective overhang. Curt lifted his head, his spine straightening, and then turned to her. "What can we do to keep Jonath—Jon out of that place?"

"A couple of hours outside of the prison, there's a ranch called the

Tumbling M. The owner is a man named Martin Carroll. I need him here, if he's still alive, in the next couple of days." Victoria put her back to the building, dredging up enough resolve to force herself to enter the jail again. "I sent a telegram to Judge Davis, so maybe, if Carroll is here, we can legally keep Jon out of prison."

Curt looked over his shoulder. "I'll leave as soon as I get some cash from the store and can put together a bedroll."

"Curt, you're working for me on this."

"As the sheriff or personally?" He pivoted slowly.

"Does it matter?" she asked, wondering if she was sending him on this possible fool's errand for purely personal reasons.

He shook his head. "No. If this Martin Carroll is still alive, I'll bring him here."



# Chapter Eighteen

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Jon slowly woke, the inside of his mouth tasting like old shoe leather. His collarbone throbbed, and his head felt as if it was in a vice. A partially opened window allowed the scent of the still falling rain to float into the room. The soft pattering and splashing rain sounded oddly close. A single low-pitched lamp cast enough illumination to determine he wasn't in Victoria's front parlor and it was night-time. He recognized the black teak bar. Knight's front parlor, then...

He screwed his eyes shut with the recollection of how quickly he acceded to Colbert's orders. Other than to push Victoria out of the way, he'd done nothing. As if fighting back or resisting had earned him anything other than a more extensive battering. She must have done something to put Colbert off, at least for a little while.

How long would this reprieve last? Maybe, it would have been better if she had allowed Colbert to take him. This was simply prolonging the inevitable.

Indistinct voices reached him. Jon sat up, barely catching himself when the room spun rapidly around him. When the dizziness passed, he swung his legs off the narrow bed and stood. He kept a firm grip on the side table next to him, but the light-headedness didn't return.

His shirt was draped over a chair back near the cot. With his arm immobilized against his chest by the linen swaddling, pulling his shirt on proved to be a task. The empty sleeve disconcerted him. His arm was still attached, just not in working order. Tucking the shirt into his trousers was even more difficult, and he ceased the effort. Surely whoever might see him in this state would allow for his injury.

He followed the low murmur of the voices and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. A few feet from what he assumed was the kitchen, he paused in the hallway to catch his breath. He'd forgotten how much a broken bone hurt and how exhausting it was. Victoria's voice wrapped around him like a heavy comforter.

"When Klint, Curt, and Karl took those three to the jail, Klint had the foresight to search them. They found four sets of knucklers—"

Jon winced involuntarily. His jaw had felt the punishing blows those things inflicted when wielded by one of Colbert's guards.

"—two boot knives, six throwing knives, and two pocket

advantages. That was just what the Irishman carried.”

Flannery. Had Colbert really expected him to put up that much resistance? No. It wasn’t about resisting the return to prison. He’d heard the stories from other convicts. Only two had ever escaped but they had been quickly recaptured. One was dead before returning to the prison, the other died within hours. When Jon first arrived at Watonga, Colbert told him no one ever escaped his prison for long, and those who did, didn’t live to tell about it.

“What’s a pocket advantage?” He recognized Knight’s voice and the doctor sounded genuinely confused.

“A derringer. Personally, I’d never carry one. I’ve heard of the things going off in someone’s pocket or reticule.” Victoria’s voice drifted further away, as if she crossed the room. “The one who broke Jon’s collarbone had another blackjack in his coat pocket.”

Roland DeLindsey. The guard he had incapacitated when he escaped.

“I hope you kept all their *toys* when you ordered them out of town.” The clipped edge to Abigail’s words conveyed her disgust and anger as clearly as if she telegraphed it to the *New York Times*.

Jon walked into the kitchen. Victoria was near the sink, one of the Knight twins cradled in her arms. The length of her hair was unbound, tumbling over her shoulders. Though she was dressed in a faded chambray shirt, a pair of denim trousers, with her revolver still riding her hip, the softness about her stirred a longing in him for something he wasn’t even aware he’d wanted.

Victoria met his gaze across the room. The curl to her lips with her smile ignited a fire in his veins.

“You look good with a baby in your arms.” The words broke from him before he could stop them.

A faint blush highlighted her cheeks and she lowered her head, her loosened hair spilling over the baby’s legs. Jon reined in hard on the sudden conflicting emotions racing through him.

A family wasn’t in his cards. Not now. Not any time soon. Probably not ever. Best get that through his head as soon as possible.

Knight pushed away from the table. “How’s the shoulder? Any numbness or tingling in your fingers? Have a seat, and I’ll get you some coffee.”

“It’s painful, but there isn’t any numbness or tingling.” Jon walked to the table and sat across from Abigail. She held the other twin, the infant’s tiny head resting on her shoulder. He wasn’t sure if this was the baby Knight had been walking the floor with the other night.

“That’s good. Fortunately, it was a clean break.” The doctor made his way to the stove and the coffee pot.

“We didn’t wake you, I hope?” If Abigail was disconcerted with his

presence in her state of dress, as she wore a dressing gown of faded calico and paisley, the doctor's wife certainly didn't reveal it.

"No, ma'am, you didn't." Jon looked over his shoulder to Victoria. "What time is it?"

"A little after midnight," Knight answered, setting a cup in front of Jon. He walked to Victoria. "I can take him, now."

With obvious reluctance, Victoria returned the baby to his father. Motion on the other side of the table pulled Jon's attention from Victoria to the doctor's wife, who stood, never once disturbing the infant asleep on her shoulder. Jon bolted to his feet. While it was more than apparent that some social conventions weren't in force in the privacy of the doctor's home, he wasn't going to forgo this one.

"Now that these little ones have been cleaned up, are in fresh diapers, and have full tummies, they need to be put back to bed," Abigail said. "Any time you two are ready to turn in for the night, the upstairs bedroom next to Ethan is open."

A deep, not fully comfortable yet not awkward, silence fell between Jon and Victoria when the Knights left the kitchen. The rose tinting Victoria's cheeks deepened yet she didn't look away. He asked, "She does know I'm not Jonathan, doesn't she?"

"Yes." Victoria took a single step closer to him with her whispered response.

Jon held his arm out to her, and she raced the last few feet to him. He managed not to wince with the force of her embrace. "Why did she prepare a room for us? Why aren't we at your house?"

"*Our* house," she corrected. "Safety. When I turned Colbert's two men loose three hours ago, I gave them five minutes to get out of town, but I don't trust either of them."

His chest tightened with the tension filling him. "Where is Colbert?"

Victoria tilted her head back, one hand on the right side of his chest. "In a cell. Klint, Karl, and Yancy are guarding him in shifts."

Yancy. The candy shop owner. The one who told everyone to call him "Yank."

She rose up on her tiptoes and feathered a kiss on the underside of his chin. His breath caught with the trailing of her fingertips along the side of his neck. She added, "He'll stay there until Judge Davis gets here to straighten this whole mess out. Curt is on his way to the Indian Territory to find Carroll Martin, if he's still alive."

Jon slid his hand under her hair at the back of her neck and gently pulled her head back. The weight of her hair against his skin was no more than silk. He skimmed his gaze over her upturned face, lingering on her lips. "Vic, I've got a broken collarbone. That rather precludes anything either one of us might be thinking right now."

"I know. I just want you to know that this mess is going to be straightened out." Her brow furrowed and she tilted her head slightly.

The sound of a distant bell clanging over and over crept into the kitchen. Victoria's brow furrowed deeper. "That's someone ringing the school bell because of an emergency."

"Duty calls?" Jon released her, though he allowed himself a lingering caress along her cheek. "I'll come with you if you think you need help."

A pounding on the front door forced them further apart. A young boy yelled through the closed door. "Help! Anyone! We need help."

"That sounds like Calvin." Victoria said, a short, huffing breath escaping her.

That breath told Jon all he needed to know. He gestured to the hallway leading to the front of the house. "After you, Sheriff."

The discordant clanging of the bell continued.

He, Victoria, and Dr. Knight arrived in the foyer at the same time. Abigail hovered in the doorway of what Jon took to be a bedroom, as he caught sight of a large, turned-down bed. Knight pulled the front door open with what sounded like a growl. "Calvin Meyers, if you wake any of my children, I'll tell your mother to give you a daily dose of castor oil."

The rain appeared to have stopped. In its stead was a thick, cloying fog that swirled with snaking tendrils around a boy of perhaps twelve or thirteen who hopped from foot to foot in his impatience. The boy's expression filled with a wide-eyed horror at Knight's threat.

"Dr. Knight, I ain't trying to wake anyone other than the grown-ups. Miz Walsh sent me. Miss Rebecca's ringing the bell. The livery's on fire." He backed a step. "I gotta find the sheriff."

"I'm right here, Calvin." Victoria stepped into the doorway. "Run down to the jail and tell Mr. Brokken, Mr. Caper, and Mr. McCoury we need them at the livery immediately."

"But Mr. English done that already, Sheriff." Calvin's mouth dropped open, gaping, resembling a fish out of water as he stared up at Jon. The boy blurted out, "How'd you get back here so fast? How come I didn't see you going by me? You said you were going to the jail to get them men for help."

Victoria's sharp intake of breath was her only reaction to Calvin's startling claim. The chill that raced the length of Jon's spine felt as cold as water from a spring-melt mountain stream. "I think you're mistaken. I haven't left the doctor's all evening."

"Are you absolutely certain you saw Jonathan?" Victoria asked.

"I know what Mr. English looks like." A frown marred the boy's features. "I ain't seein' things or talkin' to imaginary friends, like Devon."



“No one is saying you are.” Jon shot a hard glance out into the night, quelling the shudder that tried to roll over him. “We’ll figure out what happened later. Right now, we need you to go start knocking on doors and get people down to the livery. Hopefully with all the rain we’ve had, we can save the building.”

The boy leaped off the porch without touching a single step and melted into the fog. With Calvin gone, some of Victoria’s façade cracked and she gulped in several shallow breaths. “The livery,” she whispered, as if reminding herself what needed to be done.

“I’ll go to the livery,” the doctor said, “and you two take care of the other.” Knight obviously knew more than Jon thought he did, and he wondered just how much Victoria had told the doctor. He slipped past Jon, onto the porch, and into the swirling fog.

Jon started toward the door, only to be stopped with Victoria’s firm grasp of his wrist.

“Stay with Abby.” Victoria said. She released her hold on his wrist, and then pulled her revolver, opened the cylinder, and ticked past each chamber, verifying it was fully loaded. She methodically closed the cylinder, and then shoved the revolver into the holster. “I’ll go to the jail.”

“Vic, you’re not going by yourself.” Jon blocked her path out the door.

The doctor’s wife added her voice to the protest. “I agree with Jon. You are not going by yourself. He should go with you.”

“I’m not staying here,” Jon continued after he sent a terse nod in Abigail’s direction, “hiding in the shadows like some coward.”

Victoria reared back with narrowed eyes. He had stepped over some line for her.

“In the dark, in this fog...if you run into Jonathan, I wouldn’t be able to discern which one of you is which. I’m not asking you, Jon. I’m telling you. Stay here.” She tried to shoulder her way past him. When he refused to give ground, she tried what seemed to be a new tactic. “Please, stay here. If anything happened to Abby...or you...I couldn’t live with myself.”

Jon wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her against his chest, hoping he hid his grimace when the hard contact of their bodies jarred his collarbone. “Either I go with you or you don’t go. There isn’t anything he could possibly do at the jail that three armed men can’t handle.”

“Victoria, listen to him,” Abigail said. The doctor’s wife glanced up the stair case into the darkened second floor. “I can take care of myself. Nothing is going to happen here.”

The rigidity in Victoria’s frame softened. Thinking she was surrendering to the combined reasoning, Jon let his guard down.

Victoria shoved him away, her push jarring the broken ends of his collarbone.

“I’m sorry,” she said, even as she darted out the opened door.

Jon staggered back, falling to a knee with the intense, breathtaking pain searing through him. By the time Abigail helped him to his feet, and he’d recovered his breath, Victoria had vanished into the thick fog.



# Chapter Nineteen

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Victoria ran along the boardwalk, then skidded to a halt. Just what was she going to do if Jonathan was at the jail? Legally, he was still her husband. She could throw him in a cell on some trumped-up charge, but what would that accomplish? If anything, he could cast even more suspicion on Jon.

On the other hand, if he was locked in a cell, he would be there when Judge Davis showed up, and it might make her argument carry more weight that Jon had been mistakenly identified as the culprit for all the things Jonathan had done.

Lock him in a cell, then. Somehow, somehow, she'd sort through it.

She approached the jail with a mixture of trepidation and anger. Why couldn't he be dead?

The darkened jail made her halt. Even if Jonathan had sent Karl, Klint, and Yancy to assist with the fire at the livery, one of them would have insisted on staying to guard Colbert. Several of the town's citizens rushed past her, buckets in hand to assist with the brigade. Even if all three of her guards were at the fire, they would have left a single lantern burning.

She looked over her shoulder at the other end of town, where the livery stood. Flames tinted the low-hanging clouds in hellish shades of orange and red.

Fear of the unknown kept her frozen. If Jonathan had sent all three of them to the livery, had he also released Colbert? If he had, had he also convinced Colbert he wasn't the man Colbert wanted—it *was* Jon Andrews?

She had to do something. She couldn't continue to stand in the middle of the street like an addled nincompoop. Her hand closed on the grip of her revolver, the cool wood steeling her flagging courage.

Every step made her repeat he would not hurt her again. She was not going to allow it. She would put a bullet into his black, vicious heart.

Her resolve melted away when she glanced at the barred windows at the front of the jail. The black holes raised gooseflesh on her arms and lifted the hair at the back of her neck. This was fool-hardy at best and dangerous at its worst, walking into a darkened building, not knowing who might be there.

“We do this together.” Jon’s voice slipped over her with as much comfort as a heavy quilt on a cold December morning.

The sense of comfort vanished as quickly as her resolve, replaced with anger. “I thought I told you to stay with Abby.”

His voice was teasing. “We aren’t married and I’m not really your deputy. You can’t tell me what to do. Not yet.”

Victoria choked off a short laugh. How had the usual roles in a marriage become so reversed? “I think when we are married, I still won’t be able to tell you what to do.”

“No, you won’t, because I’d like to be the one in charge.” He stood at her side, his white shirt gleaming with a strange iridescence in the thick fog.

“We can discuss that later. Maybe, a partnership, instead of someone giving orders.” She looked up into his face, asking herself for what felt like the thousandth time how she had ever mistaken him for Jonathan. “You still left Abby and the kids alone.”

Jon’s teasing smile waned. “Miss Abigail is armed—to the teeth, I might add—with a rifle she assures me she knows very well how to use and a revolver. We moved Ethan down to the bedroom by the parlor and she and the three kids are there, safe behind locked doors.” He took her hand into his. The warmth of his fingers around hers mitigated the painful chill. “We do this together, Victoria.”

She still hesitated. “Will you really marry me?”

He bent to her, a renewed smile flashing across his features. “When this is all over, no matter how it goes, if you’re free to marry me and even if it’s the last thing I do before they fit me with a hangman’s noose, I will marry you, Victoria English.”

Her town was in chaos, the livery was burning, and at that moment, all that mattered to her was the man who held her hand and had just promised to marry her. “I love you.”

A single dip of his head acknowledged her claim. “I love you, too. Now, let’s do this.”

She took a step forward, halting when Jon pulled her arm.

“If he’s in the jail, like you and I both think he is, if we go in there together, we’re done.” Jon’s gaze turned to the darkened jail. “If I said I would go first, you’ll argue with me. So, give me your revolver and you go first. I’ll follow a few seconds behind you.”

Without any hesitation, Victoria dragged the weapon from her holster and handed it, grip first to Jon.

“Holster, too. Let’s not tip him off.”

She unbuckled the leather, surprised with how vulnerable and undressed she felt without that familiar, comfortable weight on her thigh. “You’ll be right behind me?”

“No more than three steps. He’s not going to hurt you again. I

won't let him."

Victoria startled to hear her own whispered words repeated. Somehow, she knew Jon wouldn't allow it. He'd put his own life on the line for hers. That gave her the fortitude to close the distance to the jail.

She opened the door. Heavy, black smoke roiled out the door, forcing her back. A weak "Help" sounded from the back of the building, from the cells.

Jon rushed past her, into the smoke. She followed, unable to see. The smoke brought immediate tears to her eyes and choked her. She startled with the sound of a single shot. Her heart leaped into her throat. Before she could even question if Jon had been shot, another shot pierced the smoke.

She pushed her way through the smoke. Jon's form, hazy and indistinct in the blinding, choking smoke bent over someone in the second cell. When she reached Jon, he struggled to pull Karl off the floor. Klint was trying to help, but he was hampered by deep, wracking coughs.

Victoria pulled her blouse over her mouth and nose and grabbed the door of Colbert's cell. The man was slumped in a corner, unresponsive. The swirling smoke parted enough to see Klint and Jon pulling Karl's form toward the front door. She rushed into the cell, shaking Colbert.

When that didn't get any response, she grabbed his arm and tried to pull him out of the cell. The man was no more than dead weight. Pulling his arm didn't budge him, and the exertion choked her further.

She whirled to the back room of the structure when a flicker of flame caught the corner of her eye. A sudden explosion flung her backwards into the metal bars separating the two cells, left her ears ringing, and head spinning. Stars rained over her vision as she slid down. The wall between the back room and the cells was engulfed. Flames danced across the low ceiling.

Her hand closed on the bars in an attempt to pull herself to her feet. Black spots grew in her vision while the heat licked at her skin. Colbert was too close to the flames. The stench of burning hair cut through the odor of the smoke. With an effort she didn't know she had, she pulled herself to her feet.

She was not going to die here, and neither was that man.

The heat and smoke drove her back, down on her knees, again.

And, then, Jon had his arm around her, lifting her, pulling her. He pushed her toward the opened door. To fresh air. To life.

Victoria staggered out. And realized Jon wasn't behind her.

"JON!" She turned to go back into the building, halted by Karl and Klint. They dragged her back from the building. She screamed at

them. Struggled to pull free.

“Stay here,” Karl said, thrusting her fully into Klint’s restraint, before he raced toward the door framed with dancing, hungry flames.

She tried to punch Klint, kick him, *anything* to break free.

“They’re out,” the former sharpshooter shouted in her ear.

“They’re out.”

As hard as she struggled to break free, she found she was incapable of moving when Klint released her. Jon and Karl carried a still unmoving Colbert between them. A safe distance from the fully engulfed building, they let Colbert’s form fall into the mud. Jon collapsed to his knees, coughing.

Victoria broke the immobility holding her. She raced to Jon, dropping next to him, enfolding him into her embrace. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, fingers curling around the back of her neck, cradling her.

Over her shoulder, the image emerging from the dense, clinging fog chilled her. All the town’s people who had rushed to extinguish the livery fire plodded along, goaded and kept in a tight group by several armed, masked men on horseback. A quick twist of her head to the other end of town revealed several more outlaws riding slowly toward them. Her heart lodged in her throat. Even though he wore a bandanna over the lower half of his face, she had no doubts Jonathan rode at the front of the outlaws approaching from the only road into or out of Brokken that was still accessible in the flooding.

Mathew broke free from the group, halting when Jonathan shot the ground in front of him.

Victoria scrambled to her feet, assisting Jon at the same time. “Don’t shoot him. He’s a doctor and this man—” She nudged her head at Colbert. “—needs help.”

“I don’t care.” Jonathan leaned back in the saddle, a study in callous indifference. He tugged the bandanna down. “Long time, Torie. Aren’t you going to come and give your husband a kiss and welcome me home?”

The startled murmurs moving through Brokken’s citizens rippled away from her.

Victoria shook her head. “Did hell freeze last night?”

The smile twisting up a corner of his mouth contained more ice than a glacier. “We still need to work on your attitude.” His gaze shifted slowly to Jon, and the smile grew even colder. “Found a replacement, too, didn’t you?”

Jon gently tugged her lower arm, pulling her behind him.

Jonathan gestured to Klint and Karl with the muzzle of his revolver and made a shooing motion toward the group of Brokken’s citizens.

“You, in with the rest of them.”

Victoria and Jon took a step closer to the group, halting when Jonathan said, "Not you two. You just stay where you're at."

Victoria was certain her insides were full of ice. Jon once more put her behind him, the burning jail to their backs. He slid his foot back in the mud, closing what little space remained between them. His rasping breath concerned her—he'd inhaled so much smoke pulling Colbert from the jail. As unobtrusively as possible, she pressed her hand against the small of Jon's back and brushed her revolver tucked into the waistband of his trousers.

Victoria's gaze skimmed from Jonathan to the men in his gang and then to the people of her town. Six outlaws in total and Jon had fired two shots to break the door locks on the cells. If she shot Jonathan, would the other five cut and run?

She wrapped her fingers around the grip. Jon minutely shook his head, one small motion, halting her.

Apparently unaware of the byplay between Jon and her, Jonathan leaned an elbow onto the saddle horn. "Karl, where are Curt and Fritz and that lovely little sister of yours?"

Karl shook his head. "Curt is somewhere in Indian Territory, and I haven't seen Fritz tonight. Deborah doesn't even live in town, any more."

A low moan sounded from Colbert. Mathew lifted his head toward Jonathan. "I need to help that man."

"You need to shut up and stay right where you're at." Jonathan aimed directly at Mathew's chest. "Or, you'll be the first one I drop."

Victoria took a small step to the side, exposing herself further, but kept her arm around Jon's waist. More importantly, she still held the grip of her revolver. "What do you want?"

"Several things, but we'll start with the real important one." Jonathan moved the gun to Jon. "Karl, where's the gold?"

"There isn't any." The break in Karl's voice gave away the lie.

In the second before Jonathan squeezed the trigger, Victoria realized what he intended. Without time to think, she shoved Jon as hard as she could to the side, inadvertently stepping into the line of fire, while at the same time, jerking her revolver free. The bullet burned a path along her upper arm, spinning her around, and to her knees. She still had enough of her wits about her to huddle into herself, hiding the revolver.

Metal scraping on metal sounded all around her with revolvers and rifles being cocked and everyone seemed frozen. Everyone other than Jon. Jon flung himself over her, covering her. Protected by his form, pressed even further into a huddled position, she couldn't pull the hammer back to cock her revolver. The hammer kept catching on her shirt.



“Get away from her.” As level and unconcerned as Jonathan’s voice sounded, he could have been discussing the weather.

A chill skipped through Victoria. If Jon moved off her, she’d only have seconds to cock the gun, aim, and shoot. She just wanted to kill Jonathan before the bullets from his gang would kill her.

Jon spoke over his shoulder. “You want her, you’re going to have to shoot through me.”

“Have it your way.” The loud bark of another shot echoed through the fog.



# Chapter Twenty

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Jon braced himself with the report, but no bullet hit him. The sound hadn't faded when four rapid shots echoed, and screams erupted. He pulled Victoria closer to the boardwalk, pushing her behind an overflowing rain barrel. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, speechless for the first time since he'd met her. Without any warning, she popped her head above the container and snapped off a quick shot, then ducked back down.

Jon leaned back against the barrel, flinching when a shot hit the upright roof support a foot away. His collarbone burned white-hot, nauseating with the pain. Engaging in a gunfight probably wasn't on any list of activities Knight would approve for him. He wiped the sweat from his brow, surprised at the soot covering his sleeve.

Victoria popped up again to take a shot but didn't fire. When she simply leaned her elbows onto the top of the barrel, Jon heaved out a sigh. He grabbed her shirt and pulled her down. "First rule of engaging the enemy—don't give him a target."

The grin crossing her face was sheepish. "I've never really been in a gunfight."

"I couldn't tell." Jon tugged her shirt, urging her to move closer to him. "Are you all right?" he asked again.

She nodded. "You?"

"I wouldn't recommend this strenuous physical activity with a broken bone, but I'll be all right."

Shots continued to ring in the darkness, though from the echo, most were coming from a distance. The pounding of horses' hooves into the muddy street vibrated across the square. Jon risked a glance around the barrel. Several of the masked outlaws lay in the mud, unmoving. A few of Brokken's citizens were also in the mud, though none of them appeared to be seriously injured. The rest of the outlaws had scattered.

English didn't appear to be one of the ones injured or dead.

Several more reports pierced the damp night, from opposite sides of the open square. A muzzle flash flickered from the direction of the doctor's house. The lady hadn't misspoken when she said she knew how to use the rifle. That just left the questions of who the other shooter was and where was English.

Near the opposite end of town, another muzzle flash sparked. High up, as if from on top of the school house. He wasn't certain, but he thought he saw another outlaw fall.

In complete disregard of the bullets flying around him, Knight knelt over Colbert, assessing the downed man.

After what seemed to be an eternity, though Jon knew from bitter experience it had probably been less than two minutes, silence fell into the square. Slowly, those who had fallen to the ground to avoid the shots began to pick themselves up. One of the outlaws moaned and lifted his revolver.

From the middle of the group of Brokken's people, Klint pushed his way clear and aimed a revolver at the outlaw.

Jon turned his head away even as a single shot ended the outlaw's threat. A new quiet filled the area, and both he and Victoria emerged from behind the rain barrel. Victoria ran to the people she knew, and he heard her asking over and over, "Are you all right? Did you get hit?"

Across the street, Yancy McCoury emerged from the shadows, a revolver in his hand, another tucked into the waist of his denims. Peter Levinson walked down the street from his blacksmith shop, a rifle held between both hands. Jon recognized the way the man handled the weapon as a manner to quickly bring it into a firing position, if necessary.

Victoria paused her assessment of her neighbors to demand of McCoury, "How did you know?"

"That it wasn't him?" The candy-shop owner jerked his thumb at Jon and then lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "When the other one showed up at the jail, we all knew something was rotten in Denmark. Even if his collarbone was just bruised, he wouldn't be moving his arm around like that one was."

Jon scanned the faces around him, then turned his attention to those fallen. He shook his head, forcing the sudden, overwhelming recollection of too many battlefields in the aftermath of deadly fighting into the shadows where such memories resided. He settled his gaze on Knight assisting Colbert to sit up.

Jonathan English was nowhere to be seen. Jon turned on a heel to McCoury. "Did you see where English went?"

"I was more concerned with not hitting my friends or neighbors when the shooting started." McCoury pointed down the street. "Right now, we need to get these people back to their homes."

"What about the livery?" Victoria craned her head over her shoulder. The flames leaping into the night through the roof of the jail bathed her and the gathered assembly with undulating stark shadows and reddish light.

"It's a total loss," Klint said.

"I'm getting very tired of that man burning our town." Victoria looked up and down the street. "I want a posse formed in the next five minutes. He couldn't have gotten too far."

"He didn't leave." Jon knew English hadn't left as surely as he knew the sun would rise in the east. "He's still in town, somewhere."

Several of the remaining group turned to Jon, some with surprise, others with growing concern. Victoria, her hand still held out to him for the return of her revolver asked, "What makes you so certain?"

"There's only one way out of town. Someone was taking the outlaws down from high up on that end of town." Jon gestured to Klint and Karl. "Get to that end of town and make sure nothing leaves. We'll start on this end and go building to building."

Karl nodded. "Flush him out."

"Yes." Victoria took over. "Consider him extremely dangerous. Work in pairs."

Movement out of the corner of his eye drew Jon's attention to Knight. Colbert was on his feet, though he was unsteady. Jon looked away, to the group of men and a few women pairing up to begin the search. "Go door to door and room to room, but don't take chances."

"Pulling me out of that building hasn't changed a thing, six-seventeen." Colbert's gibe hung in the air.

Jon stiffened and then leveled a glare over his shoulder. "Don't make me regret saving your life, Colbert."

It was childish, taunting Colbert, but he took some satisfaction in noting the portly man struggled to find a returning salvo. Jon gestured in the general direction of the town's end. "We're wasting time."

By the time Jon and Victoria reached the undertaker's, Jon was starting to have doubts that English was still in the town. There was no way for his doppelganger to get out. Every creek and river that bordered the town was swollen out of its banks, and two of the homes nearest Blueberry Creek were flooded with a foot of water. The only way in or out of town was the road that went to the north and led to the Brokken Arrow. English would have to know it was the only way in or out.

The heavy fog drifted around the buildings as if it was some sort of strange, living creature seeking a manner to invade every structure. It curled in thick gouts of damp gray around Victoria and him, trailing droplets of water on everything it touched. The fog parted for a moment in front of the undertakers, and a flicker of movement behind the coffin displayed in the window of the Klein's establishment caught in the corner of Jon's eye before the curtain of fog closed again. He grabbed Victoria and pulled her out of what he quickly calculated to be the line of sight afforded by the large glass plate.

She didn't argue, merely looked over her shoulder at him. He pointed to the building, and then pressed his finger to his lips. A visible shudder rippled over Victoria.

"Is there a back door?" Jon kept his voice at a whisper, not sure how far sound would carry.

"Yes."

Jon heaved out a short, harsh breath. "We've only got one gun between us, and it's down three rounds. Go around the back of the building and make your way toward the houses. One of us has to go get help."

"Why do I have to get help?"

"Because if anything happened to you..." He trailed off, unwilling to even try to define what it would do to him.

She tilted her head up to him. In the clinging fog, the tendrils of hair escaping her severe chignon curled and glistened. More than anything, he wanted to take her away from this place, leave Brokken behind, and find someplace where his past wouldn't always be a specter. Her hesitation felt as if an eternity passed and then she nodded. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Thank you." He studied the Klein's building, debating the best manner to make his approach.

Victoria handed her revolver to him. "You're going to need this."

His fingers curled around the grip. As she turned from him to go around to the back of the building, he pulled her into a fierce, one-armed embrace and kissed her. She wound her arms around his neck, clinging to him long after the kiss ended. As he slipped free of her arms, she raised up to tip-toe and kissed him again.

"For luck," she said.

"We're going to need it." Jon watched her melt away into the ever-thickening fog. How could it get any thicker? He could barely see the Klein's business through the grayness.

When he thought he'd allowed enough time for Victoria to get around the back of the building and out of the line of fire, Jon drew a deep, steadying breath and approached the undertakers. His first step onto the boardwalk was almost his last. The wood absorbed so much moisture over the past days that the fog beaded on the surface and made the planks as slick as winter ice.

Off-balance with his arm immobilized to his torso, his foot slipped, and he crashed to a knee. The soft tap of metal against glass was his only warning. He lunged himself backward, as far out of the line of fire as possible, even as a muffled shot sounded. A small blossom of muzzle flash dissipated, drowned by the fog.

Without any conscious thought, Jon snapped the revolver up, twisted toward the door, and fired in what he hoped was the general

area where English was. Before he felt the recoil of the gun, he rolled off the boardwalk, onto the street and pressed himself as flat as possible.

His stomach roiled with the pain searing through him from his collarbone. All he wanted to do was lay in the cool mud, and let it pull the heat and pain from him. He didn't have the luxury of time to do that. English wasn't stupid. It would only be a matter of minutes, if not seconds, before the man emerged from the undertakers to verify a kill.

Jon craned his head from side to side, a chill settling over him. Directly to the south of the undertaker's, in the line of fire gauging from the muzzle flash, was the doctor's house. To the north, was the residential area of town.

English lived here once. He would remember.

Jon had to do something. If English fled out the back, it was only a matter of yards before he would find more shelter. And possibly hostages...

He crawled through the mud, hoping he kept his profile below the boardwalk. When he thought he was directly in front of the wide, doubled doors, he risked a survey of the situation. The doors were barely visible, shrouded with the night and the fog. Damn the fog.

No.

Bless that cloaking, wet, cover. If he couldn't see through it, neither could English.

Still unwilling to trust his life to the whims of the swirling, dense gloom, Jon remained below the boardwalk. He brought the revolver up and silently settled the grip on the boards, the muzzle tilted up toward the door. Two shots left. He'd used two at the jail to free Colbert, Klint, and Karl. Victoria used a round and he used one more. Two shots from an awkward angle, literally shooting in the dark. His stomach roiled as he realized he was planning exactly how to kill a man.

He silenced the memory of his mother begging with him the morning he left to enlist and offer his services and possibly his life in the fight to preserve the Union and end slavery.

*"Ishmael, I am pleading with thee. Thee mustn't do this. To take a life is wrong, no matter how noble the reason or how vile the adversary."* He had remained implacable, and he had broken his mother's heart when he walked out the door. She had raced after him, catching him one last time at the gate in the low stone fence which surrounded his childhood home. Tears rolled down her slender, careworn face as she held him in a surprisingly strong hug. *"Ishmael, thee will be shunned. Thee will no longer be a part of us. Thee will be alone."* He remembered bending to kiss her brow and extracting himself from her arms. When

he walked through the gate, her parting words, no longer in the formal speech reserved for family or other members of the sect, almost stopped him. *“I will always love you, my son.”*

He wasn't alone. He drew a deep breath, whispered “God forgive me” and kicked the supporting beam running the length of the boardwalk.





# Chapter Twenty-One

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The first shot, followed immediately with a second, forced Victoria to a complete halt. She froze, her heart not beating, her lungs not working. She couldn't make herself move, either away from the building or back to Jon. She angrily shook herself. If Jonathan came out the back of the building, he'd see her and shoot her, too.

She ducked behind the tarp covered hearse, hating Jonathan as she had never hated anything before. Her loathing of him before paled in the face of this white-hot, consuming hatred.

Several interminable seconds passed. Had any one of those searching the other end of town heard the shots? Was anyone coming to help?

She rose slowly from her protected position, ducking back down when the sound of two, nearly simultaneous shots rolled through the thick fog, followed with a third. A heavy crashing reverberated from inside the undertakers.

Victoria couldn't stay still any longer. She rushed to the wide, double-doors at the back of the building. A fierce tug on the knob proved they were still locked. She ran around the building, sliding and stumbling, falling to her knees in the slick, clinging, thick mud.

The fog parted enough to allow her to see Jon standing on the boardwalk, his back pressed tight to the wall, his head bent, her revolver hanging loosely from his hand. He was covered head to toe with mud.

"Jon?" She slowed to a walk, approaching him with her heart in her throat.

He slowly raised his head. "Tell me I'm not alone."

Victoria leaped onto the boardwalk and flung herself at him. She pulled him into her arms. "No. I'll always be with you."

A weak smile twisted his mouth and the revolver clattered to the ground. To her horror, he crumbled against her in degrees, driving her to her knees. She couldn't hold him any longer and he rolled from her arms.

"Jon! NO! JON!"

Renewed crashing inside the Klein's building snapped her head up. One of the double doors opened, and Jonathan staggered out. Before he could raise his gun, Victoria flung herself over Jon, grabbed her

revolver, and brought it up. *Please, God, let there be one bullet left.* She closed her eyes and squeezed the trigger.



VICTORIA CLUTCHED A coffee cup, staring into the oily, dark brew without seeing anything. The recollection of Jon rolling from her arms, seemingly lifeless, ripped through her again and again, as if a bullet shredded her heart over and over. She snapped her head when Abigail entered the kitchen.

“Is he d...?” She couldn’t force the word past the lump searing her throat.

“He’s alive.” Abigail’s tired smile spoke more than the words.

She told herself so many times in the past hours she was not going to cry. That resolve faded as quickly as the warm sunlight burned away the fog in the aftermath of the long rain. Her tears broke, and she fell over the table, sobbing.

The warmth of Abigail’s arm around her back penetrated. Victoria sat up, scrubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. “Can I see him?”

Abigail shook her head, another tired smile crossing her face. “Not yet. Mathew said he’ll come and get you when you can. You know, you really need to stop using my kitchen for your crying jags.”

A broken laugh rippled from Victoria. “Where else can I feel it’s safe to let my guard down?”

Abigail flung her arms around her and hugged her. To her mortification, Victoria felt renewed tears stinging her eyes. She should have no tears left. Abigail released her as Mathew walked into the kitchen.

The doctor wore his frock coat, something she had never seen him do in his own home. Dark, rusty stains dotted what she could see of his white shirt. Without any preamble, Mathew said, “He’s alive. I’m guarded about his chances to survive.”

It felt as if another bullet tore into her chest.

“The severe systematic torture and abuse he suffered at that prison takes months, if not years, to recover from. He was just beginning to recover when that bas—that man broke his collarbone.” Mathew crossed the kitchen to the stove. He poured a cup of coffee and took a long drink. “However, he’s still alive only because of that broken collarbone. If his arm hadn’t been immobilized against his chest, he would be dead. The bullet went through his lower arm and all the binding. Still broke two ribs when it entered, and it pulled lint and threads from the linen we used to bind his arm to him into the wound. Not to mention all the mud in the wound.”

“You’re worried about infection?” Victoria shot a glance from Mathew to Abigail.

Abigail shook her head. Mathew took another long drink from his cup. “No. Abby gave me a poultice she’s used, and I’ve seen how well it works to prevent infection. I’m more worried about the loss of blood. And because of the angle the bullet went through his lower arm, it shattered both bones. I had to amputate at the elbow and reset his collarbone.”

Amputate—if he had to do surgery, he only had one hand. Victoria sucked in a short, painful breath, and twisted her head to Abigail. Her friend’s cream-colored blouse had oddly-shaped dotting along the sleeves and above where an apron would have covered her. The color of those dots matched the rusty stains on Mathew’s shirt. “You helped.”

It wasn’t a question. Abigail answered with a barely perceptible dip of her head.

He wouldn’t be the only man in Brokken with an amputated limb. There was Thomas Reed, Micajah Fenton, Evander Prince, Tucker Means, Alan Brandon...she bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling. He was alive. “Can I see him?”

Mathew eased his breath out and then nodded. “Yes, though he’s in and out of consciousness. I loaded him with morphine for the pain, so he may not be completely coherent.”

Victoria stood and made her way to the front parlor, which had always served as the doctor’s office, even before Mathew arrived in Brokken. She paused in the opened doorway. If surgery had been performed in this room, there was no sign of it. She had seen surgery done before, knew how much blood spilled onto the floor, how many rags were soaked with it, even remembered the sickly-sweet iron rich scent of it. Jon was stretched out on a narrow cot, his head on a thick pillow and turned toward the door. A heavy comforter draped him from chin to toes.

God, he was so pale and drawn. His chest rose and fell in a steady, though not deep, rhythm.

He *was* alive.

A wooden, ladder-backed chair next to the cot drew her steps. She eased into the seat and softly spoke his name. “Jon?”

His eyelids fluttered but he didn’t open his eyes. Victoria leaned closer to him and smoothed her palm over his chest. “I’m here, Jon. You’re not alone.”

The faintest hint of a smile touched his mouth, and while she wouldn’t swear to it, she thought his head moved in a nod. She leaned closer and carefully lowered her head onto his shoulder and rubbed the pad of her thumb on his chest.

“My arm.” His voice was ragged and slurred. The quilt stirred as he moved the amputated limb.

“It doesn’t matter to me. What matters is you’re alive.”

“I really...really am broken.”

“You’re not broken to me, Jon,” she whispered.

The exhaustion hit her with a vengeance. She had been awake for almost thirty-six hours. She didn’t want to fall asleep where she was, but she was unable to keep her eyes open another second. Without jostling him, Victoria worked her way under his uninjured arm. As her eyes closed, his arm wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her against him.

This was where she belonged, at his side, wrapped in his embrace.



JUDGE DAVIS SHUFFLED a stack of papers, set them to a side, and then looked around the table. His gaze lingered on Colbert. That she was seated across from the vile man made Victoria’s skin crawl. Davis shifted his gaze to her. Victoria did her best not to squirm under the venerable judge’s scrutiny. The tightening of Jon’s hand on hers helped her remain motionless. His sight turned to Jon.

Jon sat straight in the chair, the sleeve on his left arm pinned back. He was still pale, and anything more than a short walk around her small flower garden left him shaking with exhaustion.

“The last time I was in this bank, I was here because of the Andrews gang.” Davis finally spoke. “Sheriff, you have a serious enforcement problem in your town.”

Victoria bit back the angry retort she longed to loose. Jon squeezed her hand and spoke. “The problem has been resolved, your Honor.”

Davis’s lips pursed and he tilted his head toward Jon, the disapproval lining his features causing Victoria’s stomach to sink. He turned to Colbert. “Why are you here?”

“I came here to take Jonathan English back to Watonga Prison.” Colbert looked across the table at Jon, never breaking eye contact.

Jon didn’t back down, either.

Davis’s gaze skipped from Jon to Colbert. “I thought this man was Jonathan English.”

“No, sir.” Colbert finally looked away from Jon. “Jonathan English is at the undertakers, being prepared for burial.”

Davis blinked. Victoria finally looked away from the judge, bowing her head. Her hand, held safe within Jon’s, was just visible under the table.

“Who are you?” Davis demanded.

“Ishmael Jonathan Michael Andrews, sir.” Jon tilted his head ever so slightly to Davis.

“Of the Andrews gang?” Davis reached for the stack of papers in front of him.

“No.” Colbert spoke. “He’s not a member of that group of outlaws and probably never was.”

“Probably?” The manner Davis’s voice rose on the end of the word lifted the hair on the back of Victoria’s neck.

“Let me rephrase that. There is no way this man could have been part of the outlaw gang, because when they were doing their worst, he was in my prison.” Colbert’s gaze flickered to Victoria for a brief second and then back to Jon.

“You just said you came here to take Jonathan English back to Watonga. You also had this man in your prison?” Davis’s rigidity broke and he craned his neck toward Colbert.

“I never had English. I had the wrong man.”

The tightening of Jon’s posture was probably indistinguishable to anyone else but Victoria. She squeezed his hand, hoping to convey some assurance to him.

The judge leaned an elbow onto the conference table. “Wasn’t this man serving time for the rape of a young woman? Or, was that English, too?”

“Your Honor, if I may?” Victoria extracted her hand from Jon’s. “Jon—”

“Jon?”

“Mr. Andrews, your Honor, was railroaded into a conviction. The woman he was accused of hurting is here in Brokken.” Victoria stood, drawing her hands down the front of her skirt. Wearing the creation bought out of the general store window had seemed like a good idea at the time. Now, she would have felt more confident in her usual attire of trousers and chambray. “I sent one of my deputies to find her. She’s in Mr. Brokken’s office.”

Jon snapped his head up to Victoria. “Varina’s here?”

“Bring her in.” Davis’s voice oozed with long-suffering impatience.

Victoria walked to the closed door and pulled it open. Curt stood guard outside his brother’s office and the woman who still held Jon’s life in her hands. As the first time she saw her, Victoria’s heart twisted with pity for how Varina Carroll had been used.

Curt ushered Varina toward the conference room and then through the open door. Her father, bent and stooped, a battered and sweat-stained slouch hat held in one hand, followed. Jon, the judge, and Colbert all came to their feet with the fragile-looking woman’s entrance. Colbert’s jaw dropped and even Davis was hard-pressed to remain impassive.

The woman's hair was the color of freshly fallen snow, her skin so pale and white it was nearly translucent. It was her eyes, though, that drew most people in—a shade of gray so light as to be almost white. Varina scanned the room and the assembly with those unsettling eyes, finally resting on Jon. A genuine smile crossed her delicate features. "Ishy." Her voice was as ethereal as her appearance.

*Ishy?* In spite of the sense of foreboding in the room, the woman's pet name brought a smile to Victoria's face.

Jon dipped his head in greeting. "Hello, Varina."

"Daddy said you went away because of me."

Jon shook his head. "No. It wasn't because of you." He walked around the table to where Varina stood with her father and pulled a chair out for the woman. Her father stood next to Colbert.

Varina touched Jon's upper arm, her gaze following the sleeve to where it was pinned back on itself. "You've been hurt."

Victoria's heart clenched with the innocence, the child-like quality to this woman. The man she knew never would have done anything to harm Varina Carroll. Curt moved to stand closer to the strange woman, as if in a defensive position.

"I'll be all right." Jon took Varina's arm and assisted her to sit. "Varina, Judge Davis wants to ask you a few questions."

Varina's father, Colbert, and Davis sat once the woman was seated. She looked up at Jon, her smooth brow furrowing with consternation. "Did I do something wrong, Ishy?"

"No, Rina, you didn't do anything wrong." Jon dropped to one knee at her side. "Just answer his questions truthfully and as well as you can remember. You can do that."

Varina's pale, pale hand left Jon's arm. She primly folded her hands on her lap, her head bowed. "What questions does he want to ask me?"

Jon still knelt at her side. "He wants to ask you about when I worked on the Tumbling M."

A hint of a smile emerged, visible even with her head bowed. "You talked to me about books, and places I can't go. I never finished reading *Moby Dick* because every time I read Ishmael's name, I saw you. You were the only friend I ever had."

Jon's shoulders rounded. He took the woman's fragile hands into his. "I'll always be your friend, Varina Carroll."

Varina lifted her head and studied Jon for a long moment. She then looked over her shoulder at Victoria. The soft, sad smile lifting her lips made the breath catch in the back of Victoria's throat. Varina returned her gaze to Jon. "You were always alone. You're not now, are you?"

"No."

“I can answer the questions.” Varina looked down the table to the judge.

Jon stood and stepped away from the ethereal woman. He stood at Victoria’s side and took her hand into his again. Victoria held onto him as if she were drowning, and he was her only lifeline.

Davis studied Varina for a long moment. “Is *Moby Dick* the only book you and Mr. Andrews read?”

Varina shook her head. “I can’t go out in the sunshine. I’m forced to stay inside during the day, so I read a lot. At night, I can be outside. I take care of my flowers at night. Ishy started helping me, and we started to talk about books. Daddy’s bought me a lot of books. Every time he goes to town, he buys me a new book.” She paused to smile at her father. “Ishy told me about Mrs. Stowe’s book. How can anyone be so cruel to other people, just because of the color of their skin?”

The poignancy of her question hung in the room. Perhaps as much as Isaac, Varina had been on the receiving end of cruelty and prejudice simply because she was different.

Davis cleared his throat. “What else did Mr. Andrews do when he was there?”

“Daddy said he was a good worker.” She smiled again at her father. “Isn’t that right, Daddy?”

Martin Carroll nodded. His sight never left his daughter.

The judge again cleared his throat. “Did Mr. Andrews ever do anything inappropriate with you, Miss Carroll?”

Varina’s laugh reminded Victoria of tiny, silver bells. “He is a gentleman.” Her voice took on an edge. “I heard what those men told you after Ishy left, Daddy. I heard them say I had to say he hurt me. Ishy never hurt me. He never did anything to hurt me. He didn’t even kiss me.” She twisted her head around to look at Jon and Victoria. Tears welled in her unusual eyes, making the white-gray sparkle like snowflakes in the winter sunshine. “Did you go away because those men wanted me to lie?”

Before Jon could answer, Davis interjected. “I don’t need to hear any more. Miss Carroll, thank you.”

Curt offered his hand to the strange woman. As she walked to the door, she stopped, her gaze skipping from Jon to Victoria. “Will you let me hug you, Ishmael, one time?”

Without waiting for Jon’s answer, Victoria released his hand and took two steps back. Jon glanced at Victoria, the depths of his eyes darkened with pain for the hurt inflicted on Varina. Then, he held his arm out to the ethereal woman.

Varina wrapped her arms around him. “I will miss you, Ishy, perhaps more so now than I did before.” She released Jon from her embrace but grabbed his hand. Without letting go, she reached across



the distance and took Victoria's hand. As she pulled them closer and then folded her hand into Jon's, Varina looked into Victoria's face. Victoria forced herself to meet the unnerving, pale gaze.

"Take good care of him," Varina whispered. "He shouldn't be alone."

"I will," Victoria promised the woman. "I give you my word."

Martin Carroll gestured for Curt and his daughter to leave. He waited until Curt pulled the door closed before he spoke. "Your Honor, I have something I need to say."

Davis leaned back in his chair. Jon stiffened, and his fingers tightened around Victoria's. He seemed to be holding his breath. The judge dipped his head. "Speak your piece, Mr. Carroll."

Carroll twisted his hat, turning it around and around. "I'm an old man. My doctor told me a little while ago I wouldn't live to see my next birthday. I've proven him wrong, but I know my time's coming fast." The old man glanced over at Jon and then to Colbert. "When my doctor told me I was dying, I tried to set right what I'd allowed to be done wrong."

Jon dropped his head, and his shoulders slumped. Victoria shifted just a little closer to him, until her shoulder pressed up against him.

"When those men came to my house, I let them take a man I knew hadn't done anything they said he did." Carroll's gnarled fingers twisted the hat into an almost unrecognizable shape. He turned to Jon. "They stole three years from you. I let them. There isn't any way I know to give that time back to you."

A ragged breath eased from Jon, though he still maintained a study of the floor.

"I sold the ranch a month ago and I got a pretty penny for it. I'm moving Varina into town, somewhere. Varina needs to be with people." Carroll's voice grew as ragged as Jon's breath. "People who won't take advantage of her and that I can trust will look out for her when I'm gone. I like what I see of the people in Brokken."

Jon slowly raised his head to Carroll and then grew as still as a statue.

"Mr. Brokken assures me that your sheriff is trustworthy to oversee the money I deposited here for Varina. I put half of what I got for the ranch into that account. You and the sheriff can oversee it once I'm gone."

Victoria clamped her mouth shut when she realized her jaw dropped. She shot a glance at Colbert and Davis, noting the utterly blank look on the judge's face. Davis's poker face failed him this time. Colbert couldn't have looked more surprised if he had been told he just sprouted wings and could fly.

The old man brought his sight back to Jon. "I know I can't pay the

debt I owe you for what I allowed those men to steal, Ishmael, but I can try. The other half of what I got for the ranch sale, it's yours."

"Mr. Carroll, you don't—"

Carroll cut Jon off. "Don't tell me what I don't have to do. Doing this might not silence my conscience, but then again, it might." The old man turned to Davis. "Your Honor, I'm entrusting this man with my only child. I'm hoping you can find a way to see fit to make sure he stays around to protect her the rest of her natural life."

As Carroll walked past Victoria, he bobbed his head. "Ma'am," he said, and walked out of the conference room, pulling the door closed behind him.

The stunned silence in the room held until Davis heaved out a long sigh. "Mr. Colbert, your prisoner is dead. Is that statement correct?"

"Yes, sir." Colbert stared at the surface of the table.

"Are you certain, Mr. Colbert?" The force in Davis's voice sent a chill skittering up Victoria's spine.

"Yes, sir."

"Why?" Jon blurted out. "I'm not complaining, mind you, but why?"

Colbert lifted his head, finally. The cold fury etching harsh lines into his face and freezing his voice dropped the temperature in the room so much Victoria was surprised she couldn't see her breath. Colbert's voice dripped icicles. "I do not like to be proven wrong, and I will be in no man's debt."

The judge nodded, as if Colbert's words decided something for him. He looked at Victoria, then Jon, and lastly Colbert. "I will need a few minutes to gather my thoughts. The three of you may go for now, but do not leave the bank."



JON PACED THE FLOOR, once more reminding Victoria of a caged tiger. Colbert sat in one of the chairs near the door, a coldly amused smirk on his face. More than anything, Victoria wanted to wipe that smirk off the man's face.

"He could decide that I'm wrong. That puts you back at Watonga," Colbert shot across the room.

Jon hesitated then resumed pacing.

Victoria whirled to the portly man. "I was raised to be a lady, Mr. Colbert, but I'm going to say something my upbringing usually wouldn't allow me to say. Shut up."

If anything, Colbert's smirk grew. "How much rock do you think you can produce swinging a sledge with one hand?"

Karl emerged from his office, leaned back against the wall, and

folded his arms across his chest. Klint emerged from the teller's-cage to stand by the door.

"You know the rules there, six-seven-five." Colbert leaned back in the chair. "Keep up with the rest of the crew or suffer the consequences. Fail to produce the daily quota and you don't eat. How long before you'd starve to death?"

Jon stopped pacing, his back to her, Colbert, Klint, and Karl. His shoulders shook with the shallow breaths rasping across the distance. Victoria's stomach roiled.

"You'll have a new name, though. Prison break adds a few years. Six-eight-oh, I think, will be—"

"That's enough," Victoria snapped. She scanned the bank for someplace to lock Colbert, someplace where his taunts couldn't reach Jon. The massive, gleaming black, floor-to-ceiling door of the vault caught her eye. "Klint, if this man says another word, arrest him and lock him the vault."

"My pleasure," Klint said.

Victoria hurried over to Jon. He was ashen, his features ravaged. She brought her hand to his face, brushing her thumb along his cheekbone. "You're not going back there," she whispered. "No matter what, I won't let him take you back there."

"How are you going to stop it?" The bitterness tainting the words should have hurt.

Victoria forced a smile. She kept her voice to a whisper. "When you've been sheriff for a while, you figure out how to plan a good escape because to prevent an escape, you have to think like an outlaw. Curt has three horses outside for us. Klint and Karl will keep Colbert and Davis here for a few minutes. Levinson is certain the telegraph lines are down because of the flooding. It's shoeing day at the livery, so Peter pulled the shoes off all the horses but the three out front. They were reshod this morning. And, strangely enough, Peter ran out of coal. He can't reshoe anything until the trains can get through again."

"Are you insane?" Jon met her gaze, his own disbelieving. "You'll throw your life away. Just put a bullet in me."

She drew the pad of her thumb along the slope of his cheek again. "I could just as easily put a bullet into my own heart as I could shoot you."

The door to the conference room opened. Victoria's breath caught while her stomach knotted. Karl didn't return to his office, and she noted his more alert, tense posture. Davis scanned the room. "Sheriff, I would like to speak to you and Mr. Andrews."

Jon audibly gulped. Victoria took his hand. "We do this together," she said on a soft whisper.

He nodded. "What's another escape?" he asked, in a low murmur.

Davis as much as ushered them into the conference room, and then gestured to the table. "Please, sit down, both of you."

Victoria didn't release Jon's hand, even when he tried to let go to pull a chair out for her. They sat together. It was going to be all right. It had to be. And, if it wasn't, she'd been told Mexico wasn't that bad.

Davis sat across from them. "I've been a judge for thirty some years and I'm not sure what the legalities of this whole mess might be." The judge shuffled a few more papers into the stack on the table. "I want to be completely clear on this before I render any decision. Jonathan English stole the identity of one Ishmael Jonathan Michael Andrews. Jonathan English led the Andrews' gang. Is that correct so far?"

"Yes, your Honor," Jon said. How he managed to keep his voice level Victoria didn't know.

"Ishmael Jonathan Michael Andrews was falsely accused of raping that creature—"

"Careful," Jon growled. "That *creature* is a sensitive, very intelligent woman, your Honor."

Victoria held her breath as Davis absorbed Jon's words. Davis dipped his head in acquiescence to Jon's defense of Varina. Davis said, "You pleaded guilty. Why, if you did not rape Miss Carroll?"

"To avoid forcing Miss Carroll to lie and to avoid hanging."

"Good reasons." Davis dropped his head to the stack of papers in front of him, but not before Victoria saw a smile twitch a corner of his mouth. "Here is my dilemma. If I petition for a full and unconditional pardon for you, Mr. Andrews, Mr. Colbert opens himself up to accusations of incompetence for not even knowing whether or not the dead man was actually his prisoner."

Victoria held her breath again when Davis went on. "If I accept the assertion that Jonathan English stole your identity and formed the gang of outlaws under your name, we all accept it could not possibly be you leading that gang because you were wrongfully incarcerated at the prison in Watonga at the time the crimes were committed. However, if I accept the assertion that Mr. Colbert did have the correct man held within his prison and Jonathan English is now dead, we must accept the leader of the Andrews' gang is still alive and at large. Do you see my dilemma?"

"Yes, sir." The slightest break entered Jon's voice.

"Your Honor—"

Davis held a hand up, silencing Victoria. He then leaned his elbows onto the highly polished surface of the table. "Mr. Andrews, I am going to tell you to keep your nose clean and your head down. If I even hear a breath of a rumor based on idle gossip that the Andrews

gang is riding and at large again, I will sign an arrest warrant for you so quickly and arrange reward funds so extreme every bounty hunter between the Rio Grande and the Canadian border will be looking for you. There will not be a hole deep enough for you to crawl into and hide. Am I clear on that, Mr. Andrews?"

It was several long seconds before Davis's words sank in. Victoria sucked in a deep, gasping breath even as Jon almost crumbled. He struggled to speak and finally said, "I'm not going back?"

Davis shook his head. "Not today."

Jon fell back into the chair, his head tilted to the ceiling, and he gulped in several breaths as if he had been holding his breath forever. The judge smiled. "Sheriff, you can go tell Mr. Brokken and Mr. Caper they can stand down. I'm not sure where your horses are being—"

"Your Honor!" Victoria hoped she sounded sufficiently shocked and outraged.

Davis's smile deepened. "Victoria, I've known you since you arrived in Texas. You have never not had a secondary plan if the first one didn't work. I've also dealt with enough outlaws, scoff-laws, and out-right criminals to know how to think like them, just as you would have learned to think in order to deal with the threats they pose. You cannot tell me you did not have a secondary plan in place."

"I don't know if I should be mortified it was that obvious to you," Victoria said. She leaned closer to Jon, her hand still in his, and brought her other to his arm. "Or, if I should just say thank-you."

"Both, my dear, both. And thank me for preventing you ruining that beautiful dress you're wearing with a headlong flight through the country." Davis collected up the papers scattered across the table and stood them on end. He tampered them into a neat bundle. "There is one other thing...well, perhaps, two."

Jon lowered his head. Victoria gripped Jon's arm more tightly.

"I said I have known you since you came to Texas." Davis slid the stack of papers into a large, brown envelope. "Because I have known you since you were in short skirts and braids, Victoria Regina, and because you will not listen to your father, do you know the damage that has been to your reputation because you've had this man living at your house?"

"Marrying her has always been in the plan, your Honor." Jon glanced at Victoria. "It's just that until right now, it wasn't possible."

"So, you have no objections if I tell you that neither one of you is leaving this room until you're married?" Davis turned his gaze to Victoria, as if expecting her to refuse.

"I have no objections," Victoria said, "provided you perform the ceremony."

"You said there was another thing, your Honor?" Jon finally

released Victoria's hand, simply to wrap his arm around her waist.

"Yes." Davis stood, tugging his frock coat into place as he did. "As you have recently come into a financial windfall, Mr. Andrews, and I've heard so much about Mr. Reed's culinary expertise, you may buy me a cup of coffee and a plate of his beignets after I've married you to the sheriff."

Jon rose and extended his hand to Victoria. She let him assist her to her feet. Jon said, "My bride and I would consider it our honor if you would allow us to buy your supper, sir."



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